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JUNE/JULY 2025
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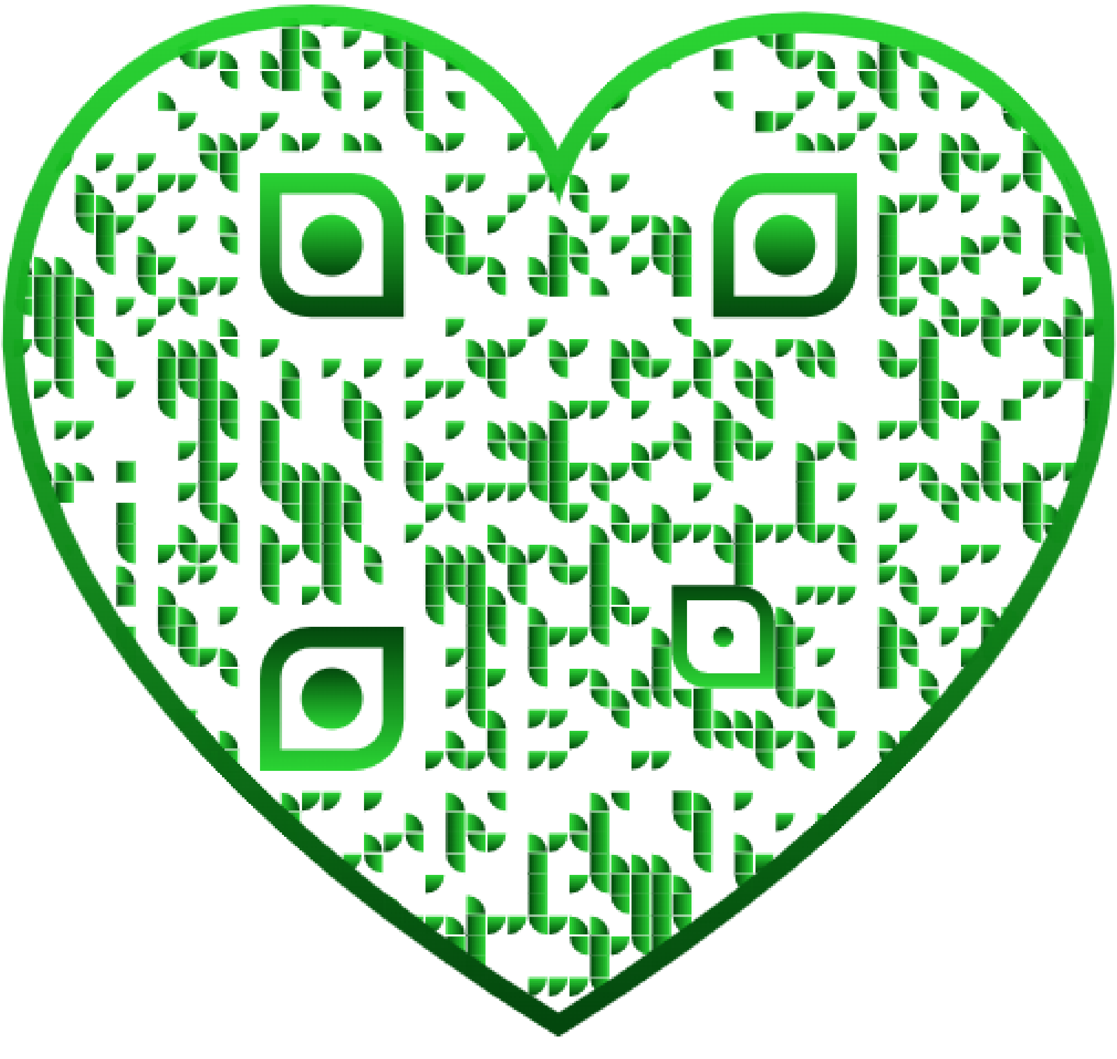

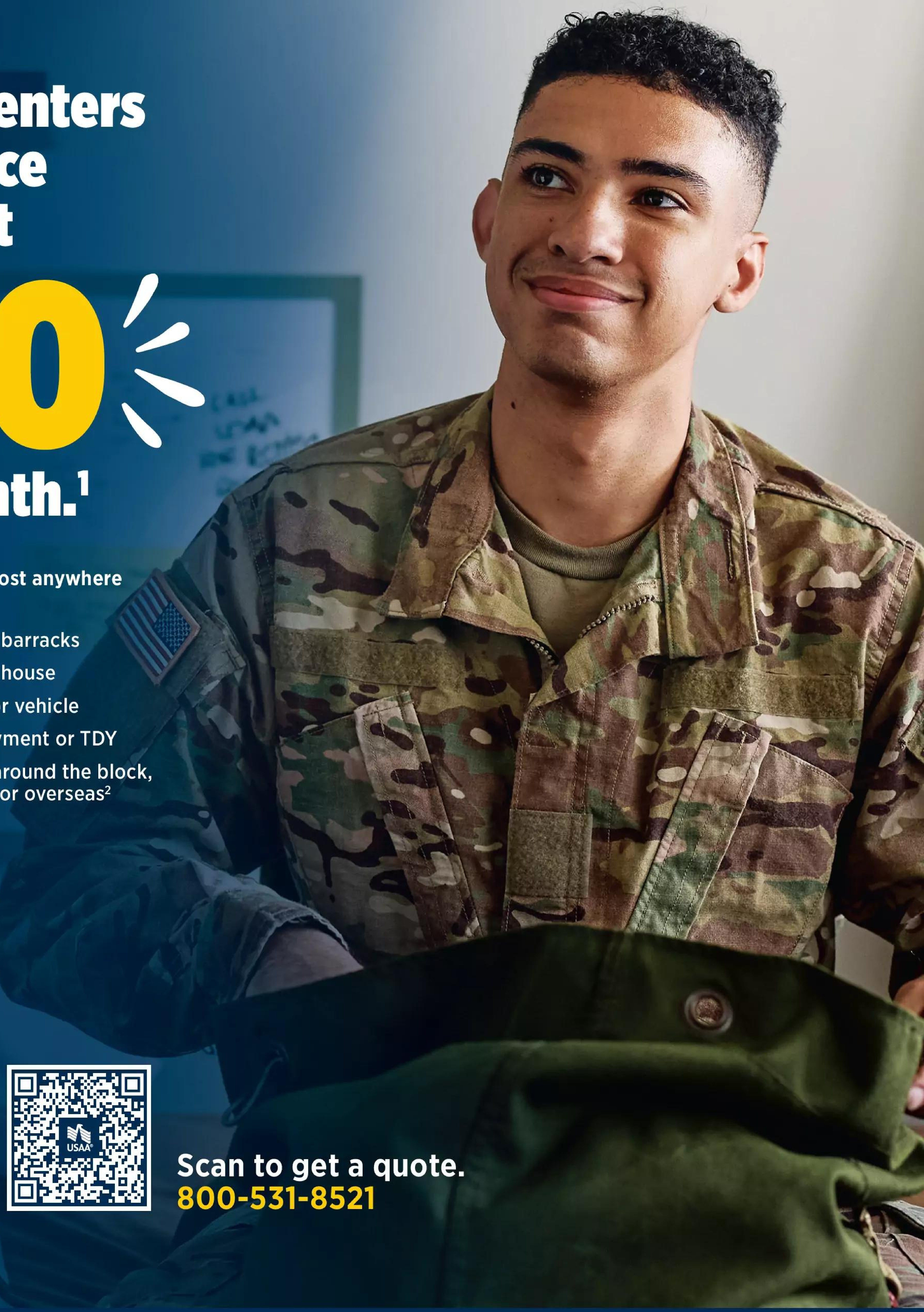

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Cover photo:
Air Force

L TO R: CHAD TRUJILLO/AIR FORCE; AIR FORCE

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ON THE RADAR

EJ HERSOM/DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

SENATE CONFIRMS MEINK AS AIR FORCE SECRETARY

The Senate on May 13 confirmed Troy Meink as the next Air Force secretary in a 74-25 vote, with multiple Democrats breaking ranks to vote for President Donald Trump's nominee.

Meink, who previously served as deputy director of the National Reconnaissance Office, took charge of the Air Force and Space Force May 16. He has a deep background in acquisition and technology development specializing in space and also served as NRO's director of signals intelligence systems acquisition.

His career at the Air Force has included service as deputy undersecretary of the Air Force for space and — while at the Air Force Research Laboratory in New Mexico — stints as a program manager, senior research engineer and chief technical adviser. He served in the Air Force beginning in 1988 as a navigator on the KC-135 Stratotanker.

Meink will take over the Department of the Air Force at a time of significant transformation, as virtually all major portions of its aircraft fleet are in the process of modernizing. That includes overseeing the service's planned sixth-generation fighter, dubbed the F-47, as prime contractor Boeing begins the complicated process of developing and then delivering a complex, advanced aircraft without breaking the bank.

The Air Force is also developing multiple versions of semiautonomous drone wingmen, known as collaborative combat aircraft, that will fly alongside the F-47, the F-35A Lightning II and, potentially, other aircraft.

The service is in the midst of a major revamp of its bomber force as it brings on the Northrop Grumman B-21 Raider stealth bomber to replace the retiring B-1 and B-2 bombers. The Air Force eventually plans to have a two-bomber fleet made up of the B-21, alongside heavily revamped B-52J Stratofortresses.

And the Air Force is worried about its LGM-35A Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile. That program, which is to be built by Northrop Grumman, is planned to succeed the aging Minuteman III nuclear missile program, but higher-than-expected construction costs have forced the service to rethink its approach to Sentinel.

Meink's acquisition background could help the service manage these multiple programs. His space expertise could also benefit the Space Force, whose missions are expanding and which has sought to grow its budget to handle them.

In his nomination hearing in March, Meink pledged to push for the Space Force to get the resources it needs, given the growing role it will likely play in future military actions.

"Space is going to be one of the determining factors" in a future conflict, Meink said. "We definitely need to get that right."

But Meink's relationship with SpaceX founder and Trump administration adviser Elon Musk created controversy. Sens. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., in February raised concerns about what they termed a "potential quid pro quo" between Meink and Musk, after reports surfaced that Meink had favored SpaceX for a contract while running NRO.

"These are incredibly serious allegations of misconduct and favoritism," they wrote in a letter to Meink. "These reports raise concerns about your ability, if confirmed as secretary, to treat contractors fairly and prioritize the Air Force's mission over Elon Musk's business interests."

According to a Politico report, Meink disclosed to lawmakers in written responses that Musk was present for his interview with Trump, but said several other people were also present and Musk did not ask any questions. Musk's presence at the interview raised eyebrows among some ethics experts, who called it unusual.

Meink denied having a relationship with Musk or SpaceX beyond executing his duties as head of NRO, and said he did not ask for Musk to support him to be Air Force secretary, nor did Musk ask him for anything. ■

— *Stephen Losey*

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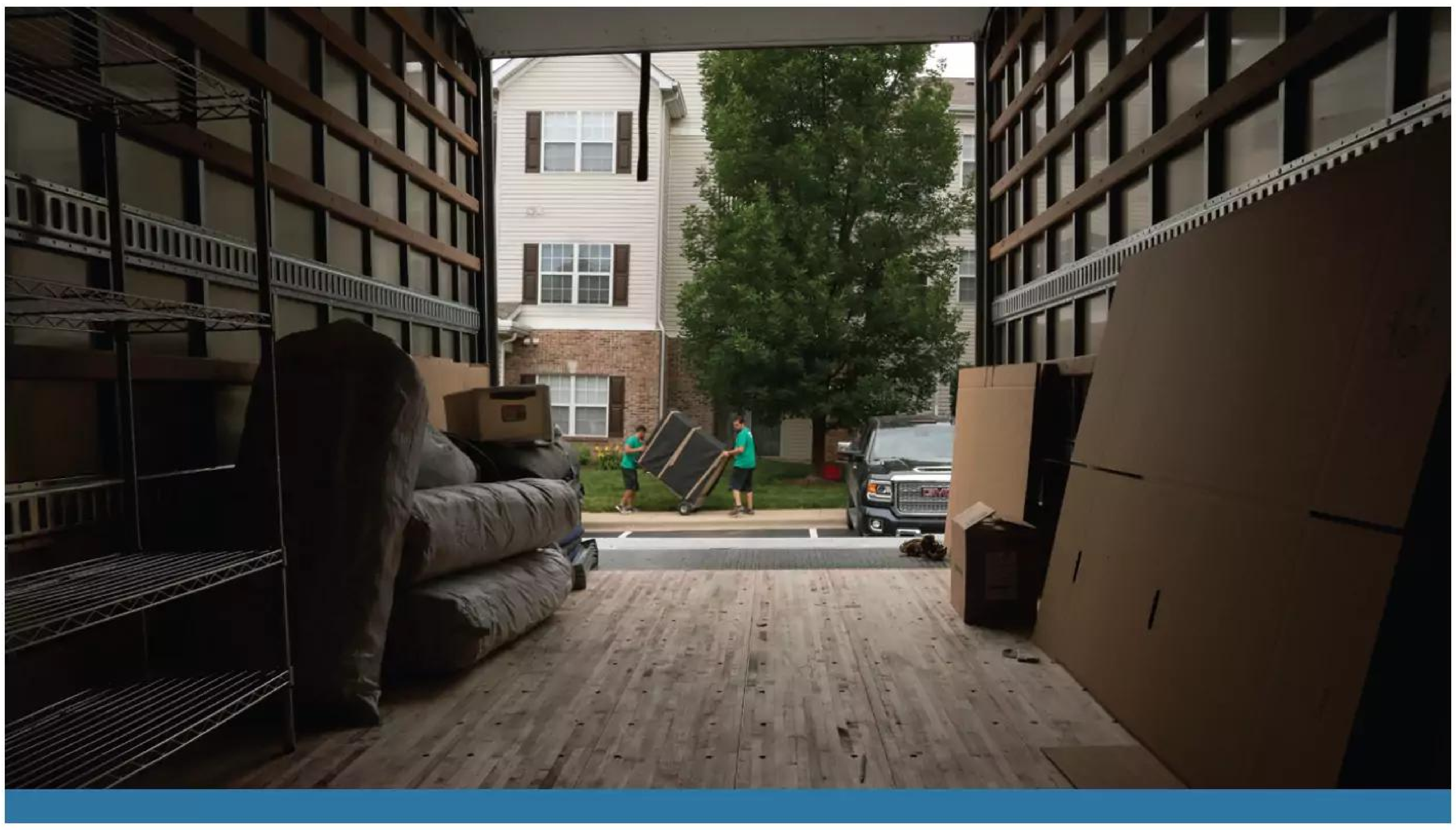
PENTAGON TARGETS FEWER MOVES OF TROOPS TO CUT PCS COSTS



STEPHENIE WADE/DOD

Military members should be moving less frequently in the future, providing greater stability for troops and savings for taxpayers, according to defense officials who have set the process in motion.

In a May 30 memo, Pentagon officials ordered the military service branches to cut in half the amount of money they spend on permanent change-of-station, or PCS, moves by fiscal 2030. DOD spends about $5 billion a year on these moves, which include the physical moves of household goods as well as allowances and other entitlements related to moving.

The services are required to develop plans within four months to reduce the moves, so it's not yet clear how many actual moves will be cut to achieve those savings.

Officials will target "discretionary moves," such as PCS moves within the United States, overseas and individual service member training travel. The services are directed to reduce these discretionary move budgets by 10% in fiscal 2027, 30% in fiscal 2028, 40% in fiscal 2029 and 50% by fiscal 2030. The reductions will be based on the fiscal 2026 budget, adjusted for inflation.

"Lower-priority PCS moves should be reduced for service members and their families seeking greater geographic stability," wrote Jules W. Hurst II, acting undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, in the memo.

The services must determine which PCS moves "are most critical to support operational requirements and key professional development," he wrote.

About 80% of DOD PCS moves are in the discretionary category and 20% in the mandatory category, said Tim Dill, acting deputy undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, in a briefing to reporters.

Reducing the frequency of moves will improve the quality of life for service members and their families, Dill said.

Military families often face challenges related to making PCS moves every few years, ranging from issues with shipping their household goods to securing housing. Families also navigate disruptions in military spouses' employment, difficulty finding child care, children's school transitions and finding new providers for special needs family members.

Military advocates, including the nonprofit Military Family Advisory Network, have argued that the frequency of military moves must be evaluated.

"We have seen the intersection between the frequency of moves and key quality-of-life concerns ranging from food insecurity to loneliness," said Shannon Razsadin, the organization's CEO.

"We're encouraged by the immediate changes outlined by Secretary Hegseth," Razsadin said, including the Pentagon's separate effort to temporarily increase the reimbursement rates for families moving themselves amid problems with the new Global Household Goods Contract.

At times, Congress has expressed interest in reducing the number of PCS moves. Various efforts within DOD have been made to study the issue, but no large-scale actions have been taken. Military officials have argued that the frequency of PCS moves is necessary to meet operational requirements and fill empty jobs.

Hurst's memo also directs service officials to propose various career path changes for officers and noncommissioned officers in ways that promote geographic stability. The services are tasked with proposing changes that could allow some officers and NCOs "to specialize in lieu of gaining generalized experience across a range of functions," according to the memo.

The services will consider how they can provide "broadening opportunities and continuing leadership opportunities without the need for a PCS move," Dill said. DOD isn't dictating to the services the way they should accomplish the changes, he said, and there will be room for discussion about whether the budget cuts are feasible during the time frame.

"We want them to come back and tell us if that seems like the right number for them," Dill said. "On top of being efficient from a fiscal perspective, the other goal of this policy … is to ensure that this works well for service members and their families."

The effort is not exclusive to service members with dependents, Dill said, and will not increase the burden on single service members.

"We understand that PCS moves affect everyone, and so this is not a policy where we just think we need to take the moves away from the families and put it on someone else," he said.

— *Karen Jowers*

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AIRMEN HOLD FIRST TRAINING SORTIE FOR NEW ELECTRONIC ATTACK PLANE

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

Airmen have conducted the first mission training sortie for the new EA-37B Compass Call, a milestone for the adoption of the Air Force's new electronic attack aircraft.

The training flight was carried out May 2 by the 43rd Electronic Combat Squadron at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona, the service said.

"This EA-37B mission culminates years of planning and coordination between thousands of people spanning many organizations," squadron commander Lt. Col. Tray Wood said. "The hard work and dedication of these groups ensure the [55th] Electronic Combat Group is prepared for future conflict with the 43rd Electronic Combat Squadron leading developments in the electromagnetic spectrum."

The EA-37B is a heavily adapted Gulfstream G550 business jet designed to conduct electronic warfare operations to support U.S. and allied forces. It is slated to replace the service's aging fleet of EC-130H Compass Call aircraft.

The aircraft is loaded with classified equipment that can jam enemy communications, radar and navigation signals. It can also defuse roadside bombs wirelessly and block enemy air defenses from transmitting information between sensors, control networks and weapons, which will allow U.S. and partner aircraft to get closer to their targets.

The Air Force plans to buy 10 EA-37Bs from BAE Systems and L3Harris, half of which have been delivered so far. The companies, which are co-prime contractors on the plane, expect to deliver the final five in 2027 and 2028.

The first EA-37B was delivered to Davis-Monthan in August 2024 to begin pilot training.

"The EA-37B and the professionals who support its mission represent the most recent evolution in a long history of [electromagnetic spectrum] dominance for the" 55th Electronic Combat Group, said Lt. Col. Jesse Szweda, the squadron's director of operations. "The capabilities of this platform are the cornerstone to addressing emerging threats in any [area of responsibility] at any time."

The electronic attack equipment for the new Compass Calls are built by BAE, and then integrated into the G550 jets at L3Harris' facility in Waco, Texas. The G550s' outer mold lines are modified to make room for the equipment at Gulfstream's facility in Savannah, Georgia.

The service has so far retired 10 of its 14 EC-130Hs, which were flown frequently during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

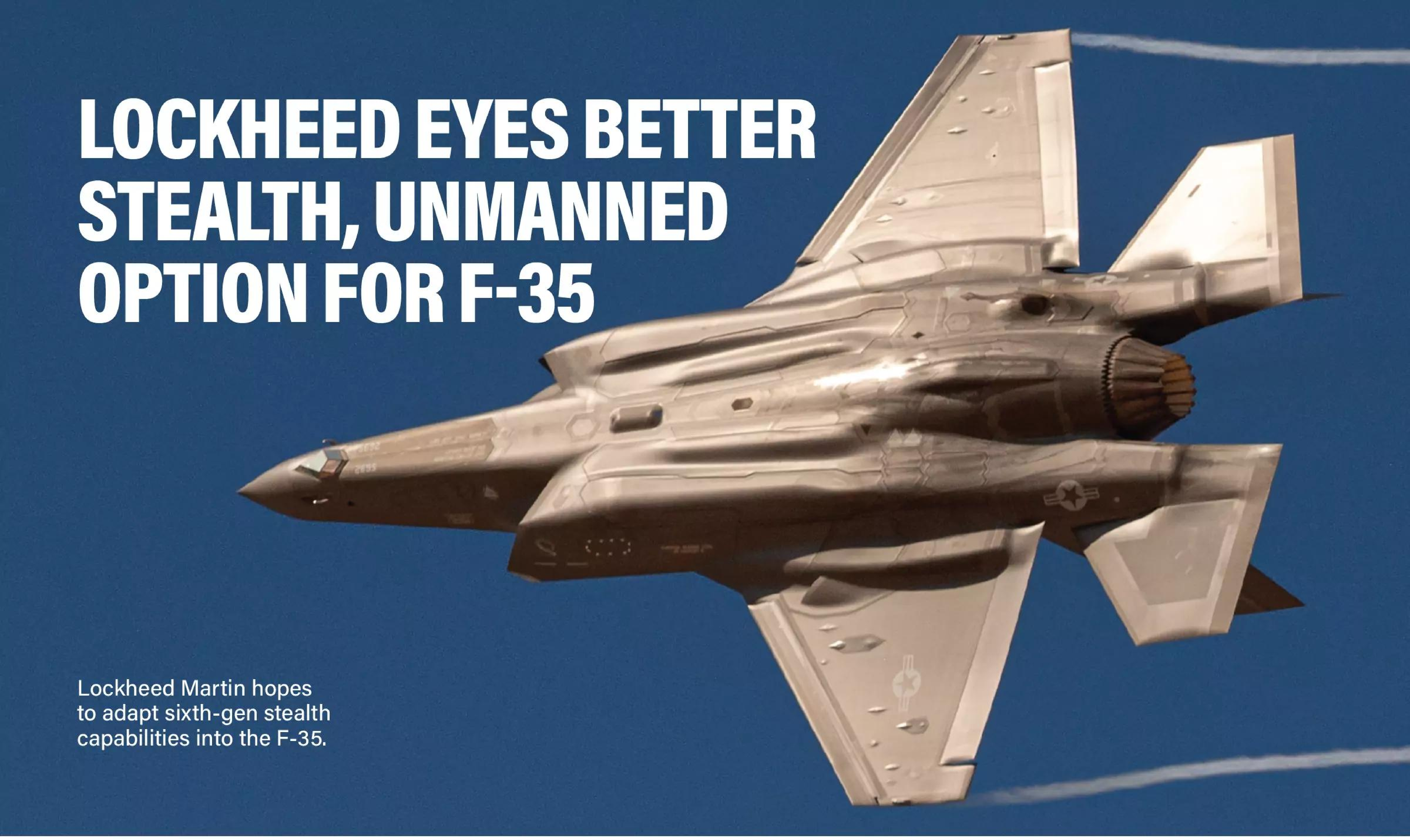
The older Compass Calls were modified C-130Hs, some of which date back to the Vietnam War. The new EA-37Bs will fly 40% faster than the older models and have twice the range, and be able to fly nearly 15,000 feet higher, L3Harris said in April.

By creating the new Compass Calls out of modern, commercial derivative aircraft, the prime contractors expect the Air Force will be able to obtain spare parts and sustain it more easily. ■

Airmen assigned to the 43rd Electronic Combat Squadron disembark an EA-37B Compass Call May 2 at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz.

AIRMAN SAMANTHA MELECIO/AIR FORCE

LOCKHEED EYES BETTER STEALTH, UNMANNED OPTION FOR F-35



Lockheed Martin hopes to adapt sixth-gen stealth capabilities into the F-35.

MICAH GARBARINO/AIR FORCE

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

Advanced stealth capabilities, new weapons and, possibly, an unmanned piloting option could be in the works for the F-35 as Lockheed Martin seeks to enhance the jet with sixth-generation technology.

In a May 28 webcast of a discussion at the Bernstein Strategic Decisions Conference in New York, Lockheed CEO Jim Taiclet expressed confidence the company could have a "meaningful increase" of capabilities for the F-35 in two or three years.

Lockheed originally developed these technologies as part of its pitch to the Air Force for a Next-Generation Air Dominance, or NGAD, fighter. But the Air Force ended up going with Boeing's proposal.

President Donald Trump in March announced NGAD would be called the F-47.

Lockheed hopes to salvage its NGAD loss by making the F-35 more capable. Porting its NGAD technology into a "supercharged" F-35 will allow the company to deliver 80% of the capability of a NGAD fighter at half the cost, Taiclet has claimed.

In an April earnings call with investors, Taiclet said Lockheed would "take the [F-35's] chassis and turn it into a Ferrari."

That could include upgrading the F-35's stealth coatings to help it evade infrared and radar signals and tweaking the fighter's outer body shape, particularly its engine inlets and outlets, to make it stealthier, Taiclet said.

A fifth-generation-plus F-35 could have better electronic warfare capabilities, networking and autonomy, which could be used to make the jet pilot-optional, he said.

Some weapons designed for a sixth-generation aircraft could also be folded into the Lightning II's arsenal, he said.

Some of these capabilities could be ready for a first flight and integration into the F-35 in two or three years, Taiclet said, but he cautioned the technology development has to be rolled out in stages.

"You cannot introduce too much new equipment or too much new software at once, necessarily, without interrupting the production flow," Taiclet said.

Lockheed Martin is looking for ways the F-35 can better interface with other aircraft, including sixth-generation planes, drones such as collaborative combat aircraft and other technologies as part of the Air Force's "family of systems" concept.

"This is the way to look at the air superiority program of the future," Taiclet said. "It's not just plane-to-plane, what's faster, what turns tighter, what's got the longest duration of flight, but how it interacts and can interact with a wider ecosystem to create air superiority."

Taiclet also provided an update on the F-35's Technology Refresh 3 upgrades and the effort to get the newest Lightning IIs ready to fly in combat.

The TR3 upgrades include an improved core processor for the F-35, better memory and a more sophisticated display for pilots. The development of that hardware is done, Taiclet said, and it's being produced at scale by L3Harris. He said the TR3 software integration to tie the new pieces of equipment into the jet is also done.

F-35s now moving through production lines, primarily at Lockheed's Fort Worth, Texas, facility, are having TR3 hardware and software installed, he said.

Those new F-35s are also receiving a new distributed aperture system, which is six antennas positioned around the jet to boost its sensing capability. The system is the first piece of hardware needed for a more significant upgrade, Block 4.

However, integrating that new sensor set and its own software with TR3 has presented a new challenge, and is now "a little bit behind schedule," Taiclet said. ■

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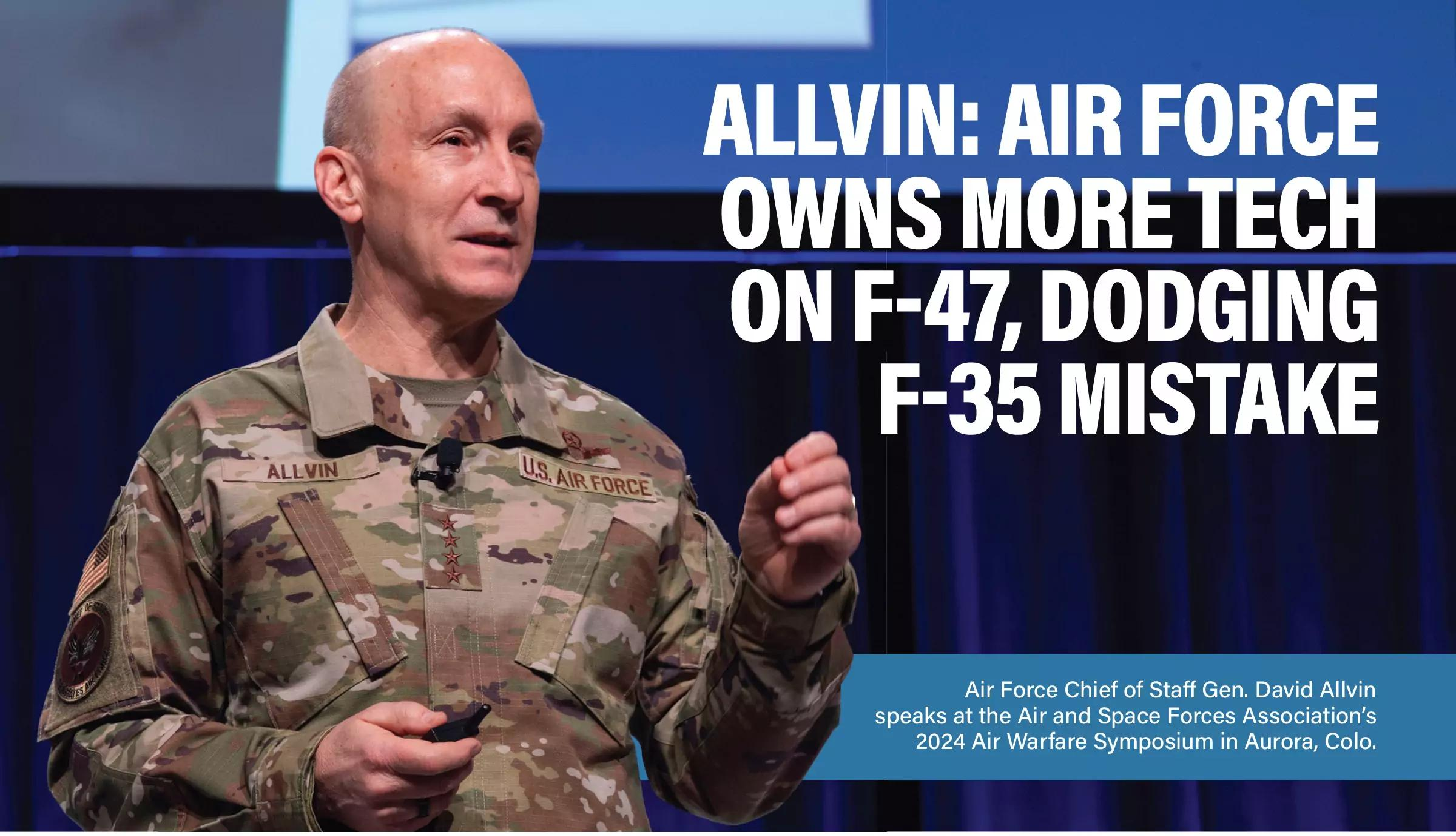
ALLVIN: AIR FORCE OWNS MORE TECH ON F-47, DODGING F-35 MISTAKE



Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin speaks at the Air and Space Forces Association's 2024 Air Warfare Symposium in Aurora, Colo.

STAFF SGT. OLIVIA STECKER/AIR FORCE

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

The Air Force's acquisition strategy shift on the F-47 sixth-generation fighter will give the service greater ownership of the jet's technology and allow quicker and easier future upgrades, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. David Allvin said.

In a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing May 20, Allvin confirmed to Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., that the service is taking a markedly different acquisition approach to the Boeing-made F-47, previously referred to as Next Generation Air Dominance, than it did on the F-35 Lightning II.

"The primary difference is that we now have more control over the [F-47] project as it moves forward," Allvin said. "We have in-sourced more. We have more ownership of the tech base. We guided a government reference architecture, so we own the mission systems. And so others can come in and play, but we own the development, the upgrade."

A government reference architecture, or GRA, is a road map provided by the government that guides a program's design, development, production and sustainment processes.

Top Air Force officials, particularly former Secretary Frank Kendall, have publicly expressed regret for how the military's F-35 deal with Lockheed Martin was structured. In a May 2023 roundtable with reporters, Kendall lamented the Pentagon did not obtain rights to the F-35's sustainment data from Lockheed Martin when the original deal was signed.

This stemmed from the acquisition philosophy of the time, called Total System Performance, which meant the contractor on a program would own it for the system's entire life cycle.

The Government Accountability Office also highlighted in a September 2023 report the consequences of failing to obtain rights to F-35 technical data, which have hindered the military's ability to sustain the jet on its own and slowed down repairs.

Kendall felt so strongly that this was a major misstep that in the May 2023 discussion, he referred to it as "acquisition malpractice," and said such an approach creates "a perpetual monopoly" for the contractor.

He pledged the Air Force would not make that "serious mistake" on the NGAD program and said the service would have access to the intellectual property it needs. Kendall also said the NGAD aircraft would use a modular open system design that would allow the Air Force to bring in new suppliers as it upgrades parts of the system.

Allvin's comments seem to confirm that approach was used in finalizing Boeing's deal with the Air Force to create the F-47. And he said this will allow rapid software-based upgrades that aren't reliant on the original contractor.

"The upgrades can come at the speed of software, not hardware. [Upgrades] can come at the speed of our engineers understanding how fast to advance, versus dealing with the contractor and paying the extra cost," Allvin said.

Future technology upgrades will also be more easily added to the service's nascent collaborative combat aircraft, the YFQ-42 and YFQ-44, which are being designed by General Atomics and Anduril Industries, Allvin said.

"They're all going to be under the same mission systems architecture," Allvin said. "So, we won't just be upgrading one platform, we'll be upgrading a system, and the American taxpayer will get more combat capability out of their money."

Allvin also said the service was learning from the F-35 program's mistakes on the F-47.

"We're going to have some conversations about F-35 and how we don't want to repeat that," he said. ■

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AIR FORCE EYES LONGER RANGE FOR F-47 AS COMBAT EDGE IN PACIFIC THEATER

The Air Force released this artist's rendering of the F-47, Boeing's successful pitch for the Next Generation Air Dominance fighter aircraft.

AIR FORCE

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

The Air Force plans for its sixth-generation F-47 fighter to be able to fly significantly farther than previous jets.

In a graphic posted May 13 on X, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Dave Allvin said the F-47 would have a combat radius of more than 1,000 nautical miles, advanced stealth capabilities, and be able to fly at speeds greater than Mach 2, or more than 1,500 miles per hour.

Allvin's post also said the first generation of semi-autonomous drones — known as collaborative combat aircraft — would have a combat radius of more than 700 nautical miles and stealth comparable to that of the F-35. Combat radius refers to how far an aircraft can fly away from its base or last refueling point, reach its target and carry out its mission, and safely fly back, and roughly equates to half of a plane's total range.

If those predictions pan out, the F-47 would have a range significantly higher than the F-22 Raptor, whose combat radius is 590 nautical miles, and the F-35A, with a combat radius of 670 nautical miles. It would also be much faster than the F-35A, whose top speed is Mach 1.6, or about 1,200 miles per hour.

That higher range would be a major benefit during a potential conflict with China. A war in the Pacific would require the Air Force's aircraft to cross stretches of ocean to reach their targets, in contested airspace where aerial refueling may not be possible.

Air Force leaders and aviation experts have expressed concern about whether the service's existing aircraft would have enough range to get to Chinese targets on their own.

The Air Force also shifted course while the first CCAs were being designed to increase their range. In a July 2024 interview with Air Force Times, former Air Force acquisition chief Andrew Hunter said the service brought in operators from Air Combat Command to consult with acquisition experts on what CCAs would need to be able to do operationally.

Those operators flagged a range shortcoming in the early plans for CCAs, which would have kept them from flying far enough to be effective in combat, Hunter said. This would particularly have presented a problem in the Pacific.

Hunter declined at that time to describe the CCAs' range, but said the Air Force pushed contractors to find a "sweet spot" of enough range, at a reasonable price and on schedule.

The companies making the first two CCAs are General Atomics and Anduril Industries, which will build the YFQ-42A and YFQ-44A, respectively.

Allvin's post also said the service hopes to have the F-47 and CCAs operational by the end of the decade. He said the Air Force will buy at least 185 F-47s — at least as many as the F-22, which the F-47 is meant to replace — and more than 1,000 CCAs.

Former Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall last year put the NGAD program on hold due to concerns about costs. Each NGAD fighter was originally likely to cost about three times as much as an F-35, or as much as $300 million per tail.

That cost would have limited how many NGAD fighters the Air Force could have bought, Kendall said last summer, and it prompted the service to rethink the program and look for ways to bring costs down. ■

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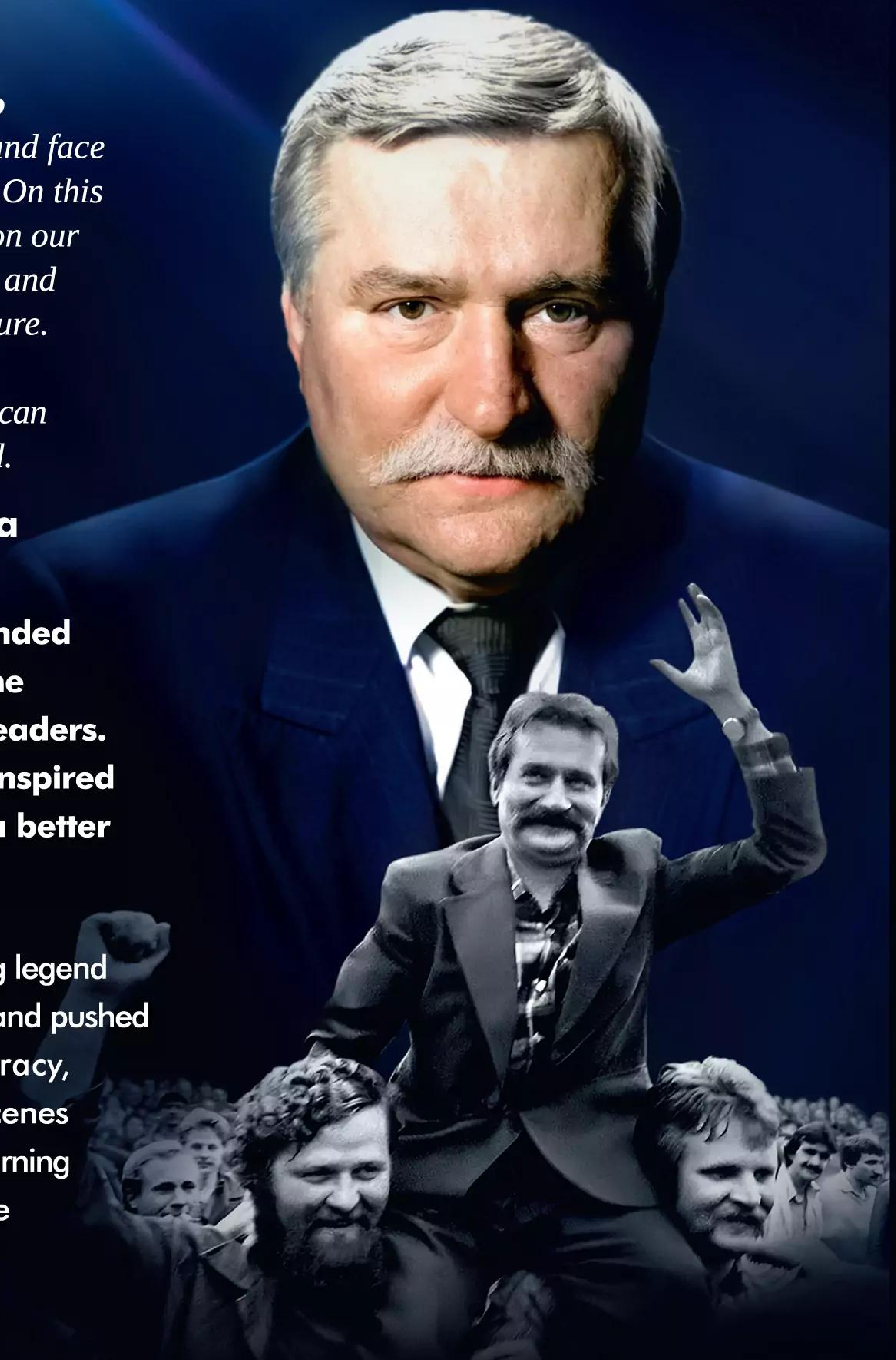

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BOTH AIR FORCE CCAs NOW IN GROUND TESTING, EXPECTED TO FLY THIS SUMMER

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

General Atomics announced May 19 that ground testing of its YFQ-42A began earlier this month, and the collaborative combat aircraft is expected to have its first flight this summer.

In a statement, General Atomics said ground testing of its CCA began May 7.

“The YFQ-42A is an exciting next step for our company,” said David Alexander, president of General Atomics Aeronautics Systems, in a statement. “It reflects many years of partnership with the Air Force of advancing unmanned combat aviation for the United States and its allies around the world, and we’re excited to begin ground testing and move to first flight.”

The announcement follows the Air Force’s revelation May 1 that Anduril Industries’ CCA, the YFQ-44A, had also started its ground testing. Anduril also expects its CCA to start flight tests this summer.

CCAs are uncrewed, semi-autonomous drones that will fly alongside aircraft like the F-35 and the future F-47, also known as Next Generation Air Dominance. Their purpose is to expand the reach of the Air Force’s limited fleet of crewed fighters and conduct missions, such as strike operations, reconnaissance, electronic warfare and to serve as decoys.

The Air Force chose General Atomics and Anduril to design, build and test the first iteration of CCAs in April 2024.

General Atomics’ YFQ-42A is derived from its XQ-67 Off-Board Sensing Station drone, which the Air Force Research Laboratory flew in 2024 to test a “platform sharing” construction concept. That drone was built on a chassis that could be used as a foundation for multiple drones, which the company and AFRL said could allow drones to be built en masse and more cheaply.

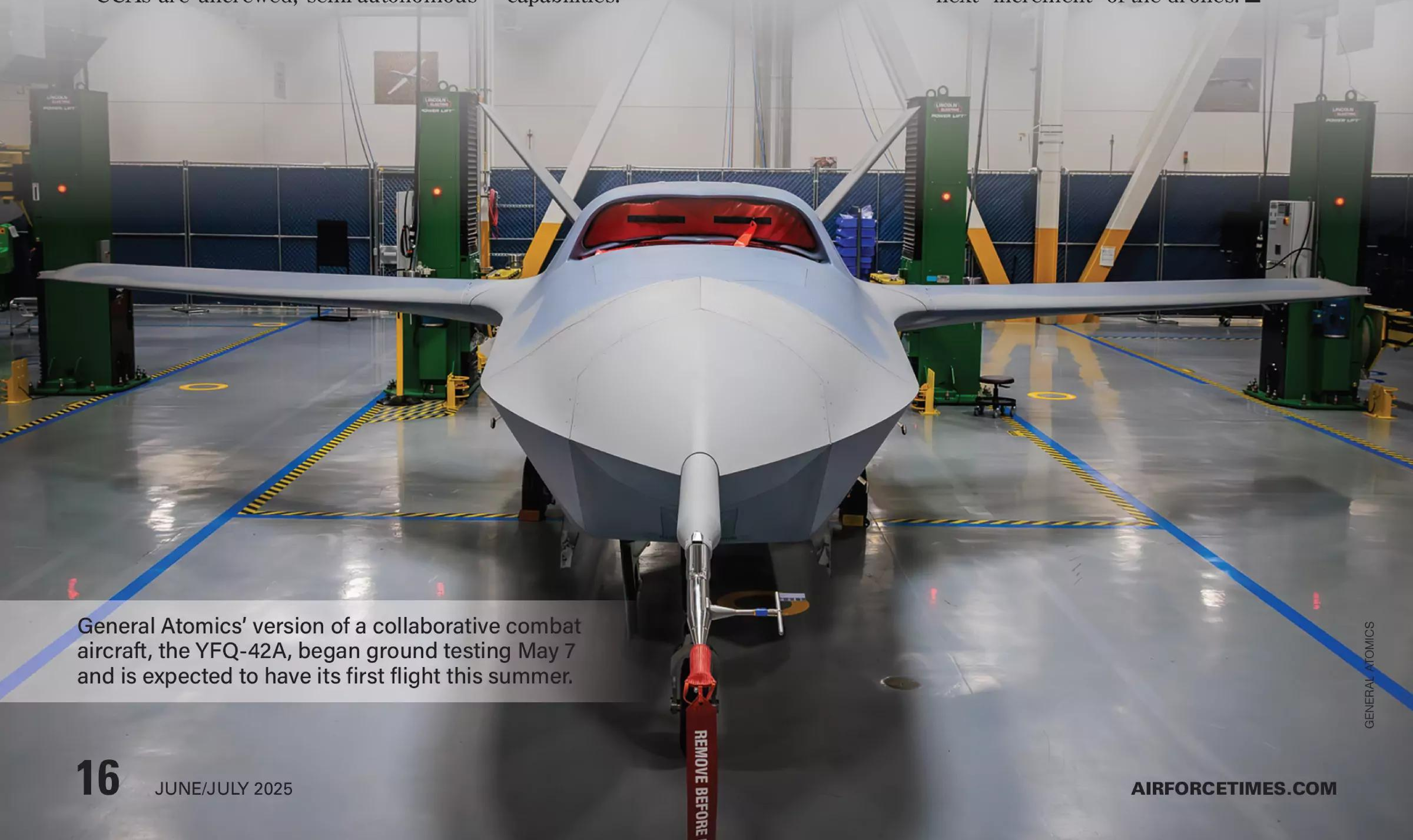
Anduril’s YFQ-44A was previously called Fury, and the company uses its Lattice operating system for its autonomous capabilities.

The service posted a graphic in mid-May that said these first CCAs would have a combat radius of more than 700 nautical miles and stealth comparable to the F-35’s. The Air Force wants to have at least 1,000 CCAs.

The Air Force also plans to locate its first CCA aircraft readiness unit — which will keep them in a “fly-ready status” for rapid deployment — at Beale Air Force Base in California.

Because CCAs would not need to be flown regularly to keep pilots trained, the Air Force expects the drones would only be flown a minimal amount of times. That means Beale’s unit would likely need fewer support airmen than crewed aircraft require, such as maintainers, the service said.

But both Anduril’s and General Atomics’ CCAs may not end up being in the Air Force’s fleet. The service plans to choose next year which of those CCAs to move into production and start to develop the next “increment” of the drones. ■



General Atomics’ version of a collaborative combat aircraft, the YFQ-42A, began ground testing May 7 and is expected to have its first flight this summer.

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US AIR FORCE SENDING ‘BONEYARD’ F-16s TO UKRAINE FOR SPARE PARTS

More than 4,400 aircraft from various services and federal agencies sit in the “boneyard” at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz.

STAFF SGT. PERRY ASTON/AIR FORCE

BY STEPHEN LOSEY

The United States Air Force is pulling old and nonoperational F-16s out of its airplane graveyard — commonly referred to as “the boneyard” — to send to Ukraine for spare parts.

An Air Force spokesperson confirmed the donated F-16s are coming from the service’s 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Arizona.

The planes in question will be cannibalized for parts that Ukraine can use to keep their European-donated F-16s flying, but the service stressed the American F-16s have been gutted of key parts and couldn’t be used operationally.

“The [Department of the Air Force] has supported the sustainment of European-donated F-16s to Ukraine by providing disused and completely nonoperational F-16s to Ukraine for parts,” the spokesperson said. “These F-16s were retired from active U.S. use and are not flyable. Importantly, they lack critical components such as an engine or radar, and could not be reconstituted for operational use.”

The U.S. State Department in May approved a possible foreign military sale to Ukraine, worth an estimated $310.5 million, to sustain the besieged nation’s F-16s and train its pilots and maintainers on the aircraft.

The sale includes spare parts and various accessories, modifications and upgrades to the jets, ground handling equipment, publications and technical documents, software delivery and support, engineering, technical and logistics support and training for operations, maintenance and sustainment support.

The State Department said the exchanges of parts and training support will help the U.S. accomplish its foreign policy goals and national security objectives “by improving the security of a partner country that is a force for political stability and economic progress in Europe.”

The equipment and training package is aimed at improving Ukraine’s ability to improve its national defenses by ensuring its pilots remain fluent on the aircraft, the department said. The effort is also geared toward making Ukrainian aviators more interoperable with the U.S. through training tailored by the U.S. Air Force.

Since the beginning of Russia’s invasion, Ukraine has urged its Western allies to send it modern, fourth-generation fighters to modernize its air force and improve its ability to defend itself. When the war began in February 2022, Ukraine had at most 69 MiG-29 Fulcrum and Sukhoi Su-27 Flanker jets.

But the U.S. was initially hesitant to agree to Ukraine’s requests. Top defense officials and some lawmakers said it was unclear whether jets such as the F-16 would provide Ukraine enough of an advantage, and the Pentagon instead focused first on providing other assets such as critical munitions.

Former President Joe Biden in August 2023 cleared the way for F-16s to go to Ukraine, with the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway and Belgium either having already donated the jets or pledging to do so.

Army Gen. Christopher Cavoli, head of U.S. European Command, told lawmakers that F-16s have helped Ukraine shore up its defenses and that more jets are on the way.

“There are more F-16s prepared to be deployed in [Ukraine],” Cavoli told the Senate Armed Services Committee on April 3. “There are more pilots in the training pipeline. … The planes are active and they fly every day. They’ve defeated a large number of cruise missile threats, and they’ve delivered an awful lot of offensive attacks as well” along Ukraine’s eastern front. ■

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SPACE FORCE SEES ‘OUTSIZED IMPACT’ FROM CIVILIAN WORKFORCE CUTS

Chief of Space Operations Gen. Chance Saltzman told lawmakers that civilian workforce cuts are presenting a challenge for the Space Force.

SAUL LOEB/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

BY COURTNEY ALBON

Efforts to shrink the size of the civilian workforce across the federal government and within the Pentagon are having a disproportionate effect on the Space Force, according to the service’s top general.

Chief of Space Operations Gen. Chance Saltzman told lawmakers May 20 that the Space Force, the U.S. military’s smallest service, has lost almost 14% of its civilian workforce recently, due largely to early retirement and resignation incentives implemented by the Trump administration.

“We understand the desire to reduce the civilian workforce,” Saltzman said during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing. “It’s just having a little bit of an outsized impact on the Space Force.”

The Pentagon wants to cut about 8% of its civilian workforce as part of a broader effort to slash the federal government’s footprint. As of mid-March, the Defense Department had approved 21,000 resignations, and more reductions are expected to come through early retirement incentives and moves to fire a portion of the department’s probationary employees.

The Space Force, established in 2019 during President Donald Trump’s first term in office, has approximately 14,000 members, about 4,000 of whom are civilians. As workforce reduction measures started to be implemented earlier this year, service leaders expressed concern about how cuts to Space Force civilians might impact efforts to expand expertise, particularly among its acquisition cadre.

Speaking in early March at the annual Air Force Association conference in Aurora, Colorado, Lt. Gen. Philip Garrant called the reduction orders “incredibly challenging” for his team at Space Systems Command, which is responsible for developing and acquiring most of the Space Force’s satellites and ground systems.

“There is a lot of concern,” Garrant said. “As a command and as a commander, we are going to focus on how can we continue to deliver the mission with the human resources that we have.”

Saltzman said the service had been in “a period of managed growth” when the hiring freeze and voluntary resignations started to take effect.

“There was a deficit and we were trying to get to a larger civilian workforce when we were asked to stop,” he said.

During a May 14 House Armed Services strategic forces subcommittee hearing, Maj. Gen. Stephen Purdy, the Space Force’s acting space acquisition executive, said the service is still assessing the risk of these workforce gaps.

While the service hasn’t had a chance to “fully absorb the numbers” and their impact on the acquisition enterprise, Purdy said organizations like SSC, the Space Development Agency and the service’s innovation arm, SpaceWERX, are concerned.

“There is, I would say, trouble brewing,” Purdy said. “We’re worried about the numbers.”

During the May 14 hearing, Rep. Seth Moulton, D-Mass., called for an end to the cuts, blaming the Department of Government Efficiency and billionaire Elon Musk for pushing talented personnel out of government service and into the private sector.

“I am sure Mr. Musk has no problem with having more talented people to hire while having lower oversight of his SpaceX contracts,” Moulton said. “But his careless decimation of the Space Force civilian workforce is unacceptable, and we must stop the bleed.” ■

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YOUR MILITARY INSURANCE COSTS AND TRENDS IN 2025

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW

BY KAREN JOWERS

When it comes to life insurance, few would disagree the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance program, or SGLI, is a good deal, with $500,000 coverage available automatically to all service members.

And it's getting slightly cheaper July 1, along with some other insurance policies offered through the Department of Veterans Affairs. All told, more than 3 million people — service members, family members and veterans — will see their costs for premiums decrease.

Active duty troops and retirees will get automatic reductions in their July pay, which is paid on Aug. 1. Reservists will see the reductions in their July pay according to the regular pay cycles, the Defense Finance and Accounting Service said.

The monthly premiums for SGLI coverage will decrease from 6 cents to 5 cents per $1,000 of coverage. Currently serving troops with the maximum SGLI coverage of $500,000 will see their premiums reduced from $30 a month to $25. The premiums will increase to $26 per month, with the addition of $1 for automatic SGLI Traumatic Injury Protection coverage.

These reductions will benefit about 2 million active duty, reserve and National Guard members insured under SGLI. All service members pay the same rate for SGLI, regardless of age, with coverage available in increments of $50,000.

Service branches will notify troops about their new SGLI and Family SGLI premiums through direct messages, and it will be reflected on the Leave and Earning Statement, pay system messaging and the SGLI Online Enrollment System.

For the nearly 870,00 military spouses currently covered by Family SGLI, premiums will decrease by an average of 13%, ranging between 11% and 22%, according to the VA. Rates vary by the spouse's age. For example, premiums for a spouse under the age of 35 will drop from $4.50 to $4 per month for the maximum of $100,000 of coverage. For spouses between the ages of 40 and 44, the costs for maximum coverage will drop from $7 to $6.20 per month.

If the spouse is in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System, DEERS, the premium is automatically deducted from the service member's pay, so service members don't need to take any action.

Costs are also going down for the approximately 450,000 veterans insured under the Veterans' Group Life Insurance, or VGLI, program. Those decreases average about 11%, with reductions ranging from 2% to 17%. VGLI premiums vary by age and coverage amount.

Unlike service members' SGLI rates, VGLI rates increase every five years as the veteran ages, starting at age 30. For

INSURANCE *page 24*

Vehicles and houses show damage after a small plane crashed into military housing in San Diego, setting several homes on fire and forcing evacuations of several blocks early on May 22.

GREGORY BULL/AP

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INSURANCE *page 22*

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Many people who live in rental units wrongly think their landlord's insurance will cover their losses in the event of an incident.

LIFE INSURANCE
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Separating troops should shop around for life insurance options.

veterans age 29 and younger, the monthly cost for $500,000 of coverage will be $30, a decrease of $5. For veterans age 40 to 44, the monthly premium for $500,000 of coverage will drop by $10, to $70. For those 80 and older, the monthly premium for $500,000 coverage will decrease from $2,250 to $2,200.

VA is notifying veterans of their new lower VGLI premium. Veterans don't need to take action if the premiums are paid by deduction from VA compensation or military retired pay, or by electronic funds transfers.

If they pay premiums by automatic bill payment through their financial institution, they'll need to update the payment amount after the effective date of the new rates. If premiums are paid by credit card, veterans will need to issue payment under the new amount.

THE TRANSITION FROM SGLI TO VGLI INSURANCE COVERAGE

Both SGLI and VGLI are term insurance policies, providing coverage during a specific period of time.

SGLI coverage doesn't automatically transition to VGLI after a service member hangs up the uniform. But everyone leaving the military with SGLI coverage qualifies to sign up for VGLI, regardless of their health or disability, within certain time limits.

VGLI is more expensive than SGLI, so experts advise shopping around for other life insurance options long before leaving the military.

For example, at Armed Forces Mutual, Level Term 2 rates are as much as 75% less than VGLI, even with the lower rates, said Mike Meese, a retired Army brigadier general who is president of the nonprofit American Armed Forces Mutual Aid Association, which has sold insurance and provided other benefits to the military community for nearly 150 years.

The association continues to evaluate its rates but hasn't changed them in light of the decreases in the premiums for SGLI and VGLI, he said.

The nonprofit Military Benefit Association is evaluating how the government's rate changes might influence the broader market, said Mike Reyna, a retired Air Force colonel who is president of MBA, which also sells insurance.

"Historically, MBA has consistently offered highly competitive rates, often more affordable than VGLI and, in many cases, lower than SGLI for younger demographics," Reyna said.

Neither association competes with government benefits. Rather, they offer different insurance options that can supplement SGLI insurance for those who need more — or less costly — coverage.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RENTERS INSURANCE OFTEN IGNORED

No one can predict tragic incidents, such as a plane crashing into military housing, a fire in a storage facility for troops' household goods or devastating typhoons and hurricanes.

But for those who lose all or some of their furniture, clothes, electronics and other personal belongings, renters insurance — which often costs less than $30 per month — can at least help replace lost items.

Too many people who live in rented apartments, homes or condos think wrongly that their landlord's insurance would cover their losses in the event of an incident. However, the landlord's insurance covers only the cost of repairing their building. That includes military privatized housing.

In the wake of the crash of a private plane into Murphy Canyon Military Housing in San Diego in May, dozens of military families were temporarily relocated, according to officials with Liberty Military Housing, the company that owns and operates the housing.

JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY IMAGES; ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Now, families are sorting through their belongings to see what can be salvaged, and some are pulling together their information to file claims with their rental insurance providers. According to several press reports, some GoFundMe pages have been set up to help families, including at least one family that didn't have renters insurance.

USAA, one of the insurance companies that provides auto and renters insurance for a number of the residents, has seen fewer than 100 claims from affected residents, said Andrew Femath, a USAA spokesman. That number includes both auto and renters claims.

While Liberty Military Housing wasn't responsible for the accident, "it is part of our mission to support military families," officials said. The company and its partners in the community have worked closely with families to get them immediate temporary housing after the crash, and to deliver emergency supplies.

The Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society, for example, provided grants of up to $1,000 to those affected and as of June 2 had helped 83 families with $80,000, said Dawn Cutler, a retired Navy rear admiral and chief operations officer for the charity.

EDUCATING PEOPLE ON RENTERS INSURANCE

Liberty Military Housing and other privatized companies urge their residents to carry renters insurance when leasing a home, and they provide education on buying coverage that meets troops' needs.

"Renters should ensure their policies include loss of use coverage, which would provide them with coverage for displacement and expenses while they may need to live outside of their home during an unfortunate event," Liberty officials said.

It's important to make sure your renters insurance policy covers replacement costs, not just cash value. Cash-value policies include a deduction for depreciation, so the cost of the TV bought five years ago wouldn't be fully recovered.

Those who are making a permanent change-of-station move should contact their insurance company to let them know they're moving. Confirm with them that belongings will be covered during the physical move process.

While service members can file claims with the moving companies for loss or damage, if they believe their settlement is too low, they can also file claims with their military claims office, and then their insurance company.

Those moving all or part of their items themselves should also ask about that coverage, making sure, for example, they're covered if someone steals items from a rental truck or car.

VEHICLE INSURANCE

Those making a permanent change-of-station move should also let their motor vehicle insurance company know. And troops should be prepared for possible changes in their cost of vehicle insurance, as these rates vary by location.

Other factors that determine rates include driving record, claims history, age, type of car, annual mileage and your chosen coverage and deductibles, according to the National Association of Insurance Commissioners.

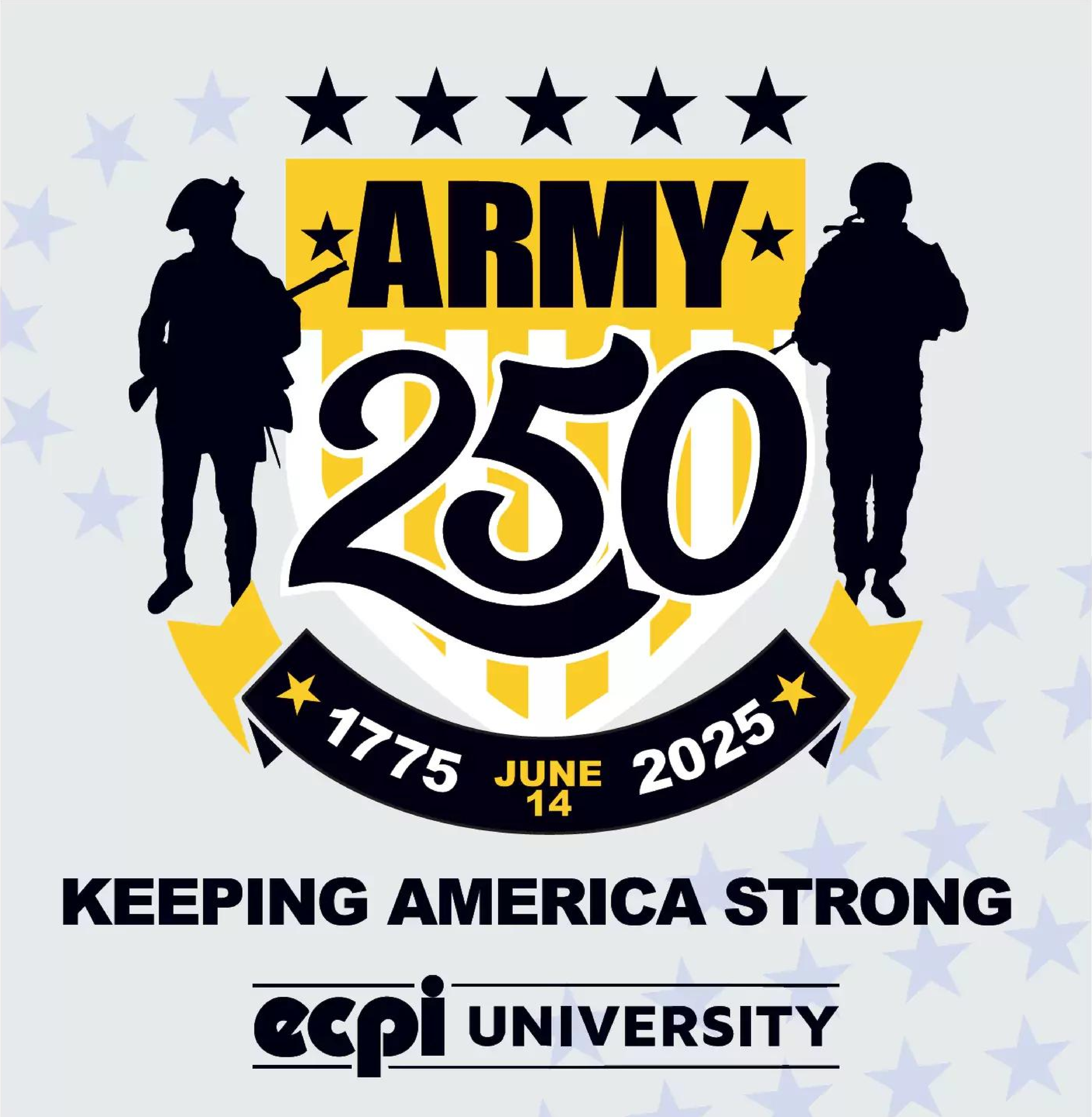
Inflation has been hitting vehicle insurance fairly hard. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics, the cost of vehicle insurance rose 11.1% between 2024 and 2025.

"Everyone is feeling it, which is one of the reasons why our members are really leaning into our telematics offerings, where you can get savings up to 30% off premiums," USAA's Femath said.

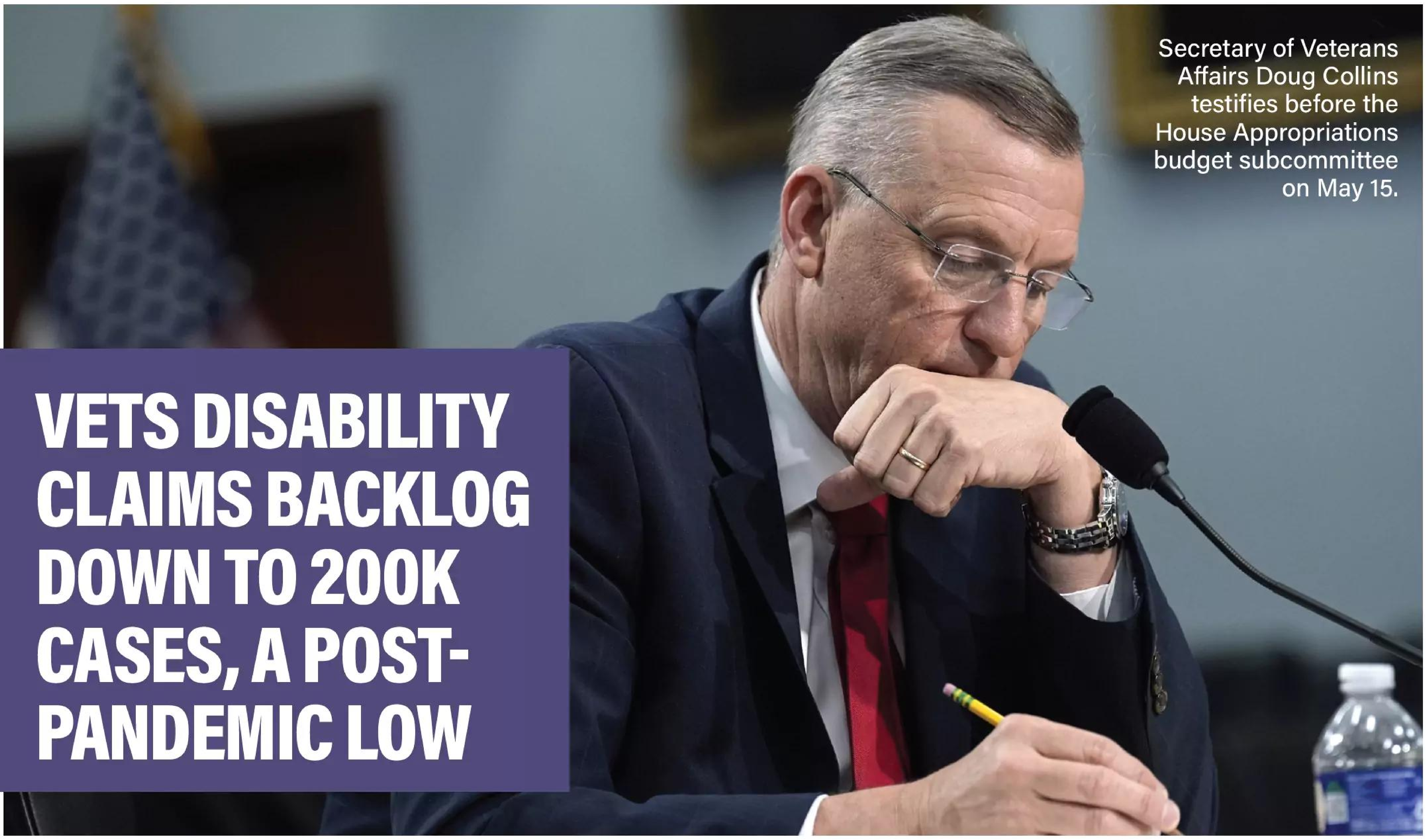
Telematics is technology that insurance companies can install into a vehicle to collect data on behaviors such as speeding, hard braking and acceleration. More than 50% of USAA's new auto policies are opting into telematics, Femath said.

There are some other basic ways to save money, especially shopping around. But before you buy a policy, make sure you understand the coverage that's included, and that you're comparing apples to apples, according to NAIC.

Bundling your auto policy with a homeowners or rental insurance policy might save money. Consider increasing the deductible on your homeowners, renters and car insurance. Just make sure you have enough in an emergency savings account to cover those deductibles if you need to file a claim. ■



VETS DISABILITY CLAIMS BACKLOG DOWN TO 200K CASES, A POST-PANDEMIC LOW



Secretary of Veterans Affairs Doug Collins testifies before the House Appropriations budget subcommittee on May 15.

YURI GRIPAS/AP

BY LEO SHANE III

The backlog of veterans disability claims fell to about 200,000 cases in mid-May, its lowest mark since the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic during President Donald Trump's first term in office.

In testimony before Congress, Veterans Affairs leaders offered the milestone as evidence that new leadership is producing results at the department, noting a drop of more than 50,000 overdue cases since Trump's second inauguration.

But the numbers have decreased by more than 200,0000 cases over the past 18 months, with most of that improvement coming during the final year of President Joe Biden's term in office.

The disability claims backlog counts the total number of first-time benefits cases that have taken more than four months to complete. Over the years, the figure has become shorthand for how well or poorly department processors are keeping up with the department's benefits workload.

After years of work to reduce the backlog through digitized records and improved processing, the number hovered around 60,000 cases from early 2015 to spring 2020. VA leaders said then that the 60,000 mark was realistically the lowest range the metric could reach, given that a significant portion of the hundreds of thousands of veterans benefits cases processed annually require extra time to review.

When the COVID pandemic began in the U.S. at the end of Trump's first term, most benefits processing centers were temporarily shuttered, causing a sharp increase in processing delays. By late 2020, the backlog had topped 200,000 cases.

The total went up and down for the next two years until the passage of the PACT Act, which provided a host of new benefits to veterans exposed to burn pit smoke, chemical defoliants and other toxins during their military service.

VA leaders praised passage of that legislation but also warned that the increased workload would lead to increases in the backlogged cases. The backlog peaked at around 410,000 cases in late 2023.

Past administrators had estimated the backlog would not return to the 60,000 mark until late 2025. The recent improvements in processing suggest that goal remains within reach. However, continued progress could depend on potential cuts to the VA workforce in coming months.

VA Secretary Doug Collins has proposed dismissing up to 80,000 of the department's 480,000 staffers as part of efforts to reduce the federal bureaucracy.

In testimony before the House Appropriations Committee May 15, Collins said the recent backlog improvement came even though "we didn't have any more employees, and we didn't have any more money to do that. We just got it done."

He credited new department efficiencies and focus for the improvements.

But VA did add more than 9,000 benefits processors from fiscal 2022 to the end of fiscal 2024, a 34% increase in staffing.

Democratic lawmakers challenged Collins assertions that staffing had little to do with the improvements.

"It's clear to me that the VA was successful in encouraging eligible veterans to apply for benefits, and they apparently were addressing those numbers very, very effectively," Rep. Sanford Bishop Jr., D-Ga., told Collins during the hearing.

Last fall, VA officials announced the staffers processed more than 2.5 million claims in fiscal 2024, a new record for the department. Collins has said the pace of claims this fiscal year appears even higher.

The secretary has previously vowed to protect department jobs that provide direct benefits to veterans, including benefits processors. Details of force reductions are expected in coming months. ■

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HEGSETH ORDERS IMMEDIATE CHANGES IN SYSTEM TO MOVE TROOPS' HOUSEHOLD GOODS

BY KAREN JOWERS

With peak military moving season in full swing, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has ordered immediate changes to the system that moves troops' household goods due to "recent deficiencies" noted in the performance of the new Global Household Goods Contract, according to a Pentagon memo.

That includes increasing the reimbursement rate for troops and families who decide to move all or part of their household goods themselves to 130% of what the government would have paid under the GHC contract for personally procured moves from May 15 through Sept. 30. The rate is currently 100%.

"I take my responsibilities to our service members, civilians and their families seriously," Hegseth wrote in a May 20 memo to senior Pentagon leaders, combatant commanders and defense agencies.

The new contract, potentially worth up to $17.9 billion over nine years, is aimed at fixing long-standing problems with missed pickup and delivery dates, broken and lost items and claims. However, amid the contract's rocky rollout this year, families have reported delays in getting their household goods picked up and delivered.

"We know it's not working, and it's only getting worse," Hegseth said in a video posted on X. "We've heard your concerns about contractor performance quality and accountability. We hear you loud and clear. That's why we're taking decisive action immediately.

"It's never been a great system," he acknowledged, calling it a "mess."

Current GHC rates "fail to reflect market rates," Hegseth said. He's ordered a review of the rates being paid to movers under both the new GHC system, which consolidates management under a single contractor, HomeSafe Alliance, and the legacy system, in an effort to ensure enough companies participate in moving troops' household goods. And since the rates for reimbursing service members for moving themselves are tied to those GHC rates, Hegseth ordered the increase to 130% of the GHC rate for personally procured moves.

HomeSafe Alliance "is grateful for Defense Secretary Hegseth's attention to the Global Household Goods Contract and the directives he has issued, which will greatly improve moving experiences for military service members and their families," company officials said in a statement to Military Times.

"DoD raising our rates to account for significant inflation from the last four years would substantially benefit our ability to facilitate world-class moving services for our nation's heroes."

TRANSCOM awarded the contract to HomeSafe Alliance in 2021. After delays with protests of the award, work began on the contract in 2023. Moves gradually began under GHC in April 2024.

Hegseth has directed U.S. Transportation Command to hold both the GHC and the legacy moving program "accountable" and to provide weekly updates to the offices of the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness and the undersecretary of defense for acquisition and sustainment.

He's also ordered both of those offices to form a PCS task force to "act decisively to improve, expand, terminate or transfer GHC or [legacy program] responsibilities as needed," according to the memo.

"We're going to fix it holistically after peak moving season, and we're going to throw the kitchen sink at it to make sure your moves work this season as well," Hegseth said.

"We look forward to working with the PCS task force to demonstrate how our program modernizes and digitizes the move process and resolves decades-long issues with military relocations," HomeSafe Alliance officials stated.

TRANSCOM, which had been gradually ramping up the volume of the moves with HomeSafe Alliance since April 2024, had expected to move all domestic shipments under the new contract by this year's peak moving season, but they scrapped that plan earlier this year as problems began to mount with HomeSafe Alliance's ability to provide enough capacity to pack, load, truck and unload service members' belongings.

In the meantime, officials are continuing to use both the new GHC system and the legacy system to move people, in an effort to ensure there are enough movers.

Hegseth also said he fired Andy Dawson, director of TRANSCOM's Defense Personal Property Management Office, replacing him with a two-star general, Army Maj. Gen. Lance G. Curtis, who heads the Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command. Curtis will report directly to Hegseth. Defense officials have had multiple meetings about the problem over the past few weeks.

A number of moving companies have declined to participate in the new GHC system, citing lower rates than they've been traditionally paid. When GHC can't find a mover for a service member's belongings, it turns the shipment back to TRANSCOM, and the shipment goes to a mover in the legacy system. At least 5,700 shipments have had to be turned away from GHC, according to the most recent estimate. But movers have complained that legacy system rates released earlier this month are also lower than those of previous years, further contributing to a lack of capacity to move household goods.

"It's a season of instability" for moving companies, said Dan Bradley, vice president of government and military relations for the International Association of Movers. It's been difficult to plan for the season and make important decisions about buying more trucks and hiring personnel, especially since until recently they were being told that 100% of DOD moves would be made under GHC, he said.

"They want to support service members in those moves," he said, but it's difficult to turn around at the drop of a hat. "They're doing the best they can. They want to stay in the program." ■

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Army Gen. Xavier Brunson testifies during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on his nomination to command U.S. Forces Korea, United Nations Command and Combined Forces Command on Sept. 17, 2024.

MARIAM ZUHAIB/AP

TOP US GENERAL IN KOREA TALKS ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE ALLIANCE

BY NOAH ROBERTSON

Sitting at a desk in a remote Pentagon office May 7, Gen. Xavier Brunson has two maps displayed beside him.

One on the wall shows the entire world, displayed in a wide rectangle. Another, printed on a paper sheet in front of him, depicts Seoul and its distance from other nearby capitals: Tokyo, Taipei, Manila and Beijing, among others. Rather than showing the usual north-to-south view of Asia, this one displays what the region would look like if peering out from China's eastern coast.

Brunson has been sharing this second map in his many meetings in Washington, while arguing for the value of his command — overseeing the 28,500 U.S. troops in Korea. Seoul has one of Asia's strongest militaries and sits inside the vital "first island chain" of countries that arc off China's coast like a parenthesis.

"It begins with looking from an enemy's perspective and then seeing where you are and how you might array your capabilities," Brunson said.

But South Korea also has one of the world's most alarming neighbors. In the past year, North Korea has traded troops and ammunition in exchange for Russian technology — on missiles, satellites, submarines, drones and, most alarmingly, a rogue nuclear program. Last year, North Korea conducted 47 ballistic missile tests, a number Brunson now expects to go down with Russia's aid.

All this makes Brunson's job — or jobs — harder. Alongside U.S. forces on the peninsula, he would also lead South Korean troops if a war were to break out, an arrangement known as Combined Forces Command, or CFC. He also helms United Nations Command, the group of 18 countries that have helped keep the peace on the Korean Peninsula since 1950.

Brunson sat down with Military Times to discuss the 75th anniversary of UN Command, the future of U.S. forces in Korea and the assumptions he's trying to upend with the help of his maps.

This interview has been edited for brevity.

North Korea has changed its policies — more emphasis on sovereignty, a new view of the southern border. How does UN Command need to change as well?

The North Koreans have changed fundamentally. The associations amongst the adversaries — those authoritarian colluders, if you will — in China and Russia and the [Democratic People's Republic of Korea], those relationships have changed and matured.

We have to do the same thing. What's

really in the offing is that year 76 forward is going to be different for UN Command. The mandate remains, but our composition, our posture even, may change in the future. And we've got to be flexible enough to do that.

Do you expect big changes to posture or membership, potentially the addition of new member states?

I won't mention these nations because those are bilateral things that are going on with the Republic of Korea, but there are nations that want to participate. We just recently got a New Zealand contingent that's come to the peninsula. And if you talk about things that excite me, it's when I talk to those ambassadors and they look at me and they say: "Hey, we're working to get our soldiers here."

I wanted to ask about one of the other hats that you wear, which is the CFC. Has the timeline for handing over operational control of South Korean forces moved up?

I've heard some mention of the urgency of that. My piece is to continue to talk to leadership about where we stand.

We're continually trying to assess where we are along the bilaterally agreed upon conditions-based [operational control] transfer.

If that decision is made, then my job is to now develop the strategy that lets us keep that policy moving forward. When leadership has made a decision, it's my job to make it work.

To be clear, there's no decision that has been made yet, though?

None that I know of.

There were a few Patriot air defense batteries that were brought away from the peninsula to help with the campaign in the Middle East. Now that we've reached a ceasefire in Yemen, do you know when those are coming back?

No, I don't know when exactly those capabilities are going to come back. But I do know that the [Indo-Pacific Command] commander has been able to ensure that we had other capabilities for an extended period of time within the Republic of Korea. This is not the first time that capabilities have left the peninsula. In rough order, between 50 and 60 times, capabilities have gone to places around the globe to support [military needs].

My job is to ensure that we're able to meet the strictures of the Mutual Defense Treaty. I can say, unequivocally, we can do everything that we're supposed to do.

I just want the stuff back because those are my people.

U.S. Army soldiers participate in a joint river-crossing exercise between South Korea and the United States as part of the Freedom Shield military exercise in Yeoncheon, South Korea, on March 20.

AHN YOUNG-JOON/AP

The adversary that people in this building are increasing concerned about is China. How are you working with South Korea to reorient around that threat?

Nations are going to make decisions that align with their own interests — always.

There are economic relationships in the Indo-Pacific. There are security relationships in the Indo-Pacific. What I find is that our ability to see, sense and

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U.S. Army Spc. Scottlin Bartlett of the 5-52 Air Defense Artillery Battalion signals near a Patriot missile battery at Al-Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

STAFF SGT. JAO'TOREY JOHNSON/AIR FORCE VIA AP

understand in and around the peninsula is coming closer in alignment.

For example, in the West Sea (Yellow Sea) right now, there are structures being erected by the Chinese.

The Koreans see that. There are encroachments in and around the northern limit line by Chinese fishing vessels and Chinese naval vessels that cause concern to the Koreans.

They understand that those are threats that may have to be dealt with at some point in time.

South Korea has an election in June after the last president was impeached for declaring martial law. Regardless of who wins, do you think the recent work with Japan, South Korea and the U.S. will last?

I think it will survive because the threat will continue to metastasize. If there's a thing that our adversaries have learned over time, it's the power of alliances, the power of proxies.

You can look in the Middle East and see a proxy fight that's going on. You can look in our region now, and we've got North Korea sending troops and materiel to Russia to participate in the conflict, not their own. We see China is still a benefactor for North Korea.

The new leader in the Republic of Korea from 4 June forward has to take on the fact that his nation sits at the juncture of an alliance of sorts that he's got to counter.

How many North Korean troops are now in Russia?

I think 10 to 12 [thousand] is where we throw our estimates at.

This alignment gives North Korea different options than they've had previously facing sanctions. How do you continue to counter that?

It's capability on capability. What can our adversaries do? What do we need to be able to do?

That really leads me to a sort of integrated assurance. It's using all the elements of power, of national power to assure our friends, partners and allies of our commitment to the alliance.

What we have that's unique in South Korea is we have diplomacy, and we've got the military there, partnered for the past 70 years.

We have the means to continue to assure our ally that we are there. That also sounds the bell every day that we're on the peninsula to Russia and China. We're in the neighborhood. ■

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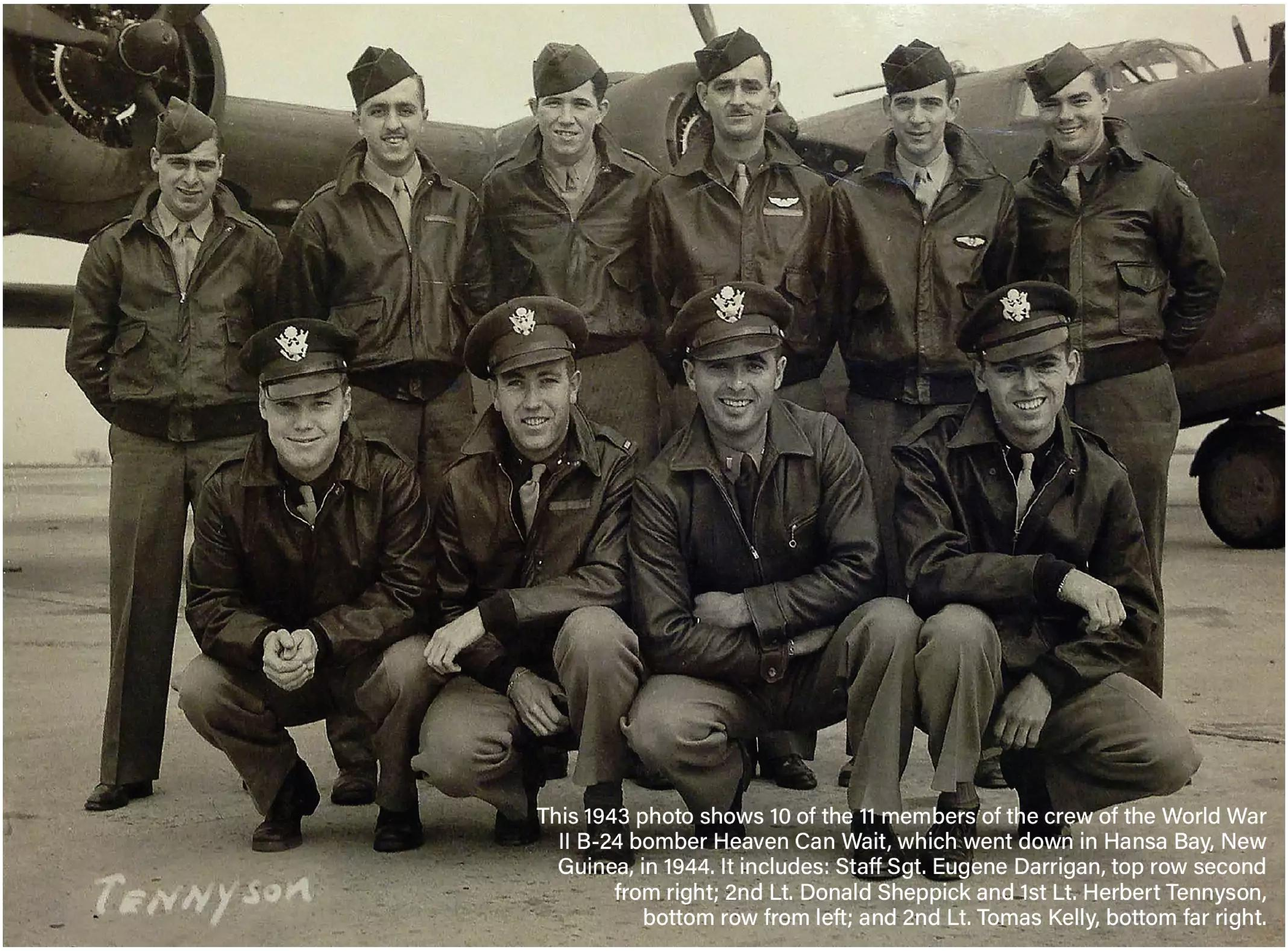

This 1943 photo shows 10 of the 11 members of the crew of the World War II B-24 bomber Heaven Can Wait, which went down in Hansa Bay, New Guinea, in 1944. It includes: Staff Sgt. Eugene Darrigan, top row second from right; 2nd Lt. Donald Sheppick and 1st Lt. Herbert Tennyson, bottom row from left; and 2nd Lt. Tomas Kelly, bottom far right.

DEFENSE POW/MIA ACCOUNTING AGENCY VIA AP

WORLD WAR II BOMBER CRASH LEFT 11 DEAD. FOUR HAVE FINALLY COME HOME.

BY MICHAEL HILL,
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

As the World War II bomber Heaven Can Wait was hit by enemy fire off the Pacific island of New Guinea on March 11, 1944, the co-pilot managed a final salute to aviators in an adjacent airplane before crashing into the water.

All 11 men aboard were killed. Their remains, deep below the vast sea, were designated as non-recoverable.

Yet four crew members' remains are being returned to their hometowns after a remarkable investigation by family members and a recovery mission involving elite Navy divers who descended 200 feet (61 meters) in a pressurized bell to reach the sea floor.

Staff Sgt. Eugene Darrigan, the crew's radio operator, was buried with military honors and community support May 24 in his hometown of Wappingers Falls, New York, more than eight decades after leaving behind his wife and baby son.

The plane's bombardier, 2nd Lt. Thomas Kelly, was buried May 26 in Livermore, California, where he grew up in a ranching family. The remains of the pilot, 1st Lt. Herbert Tennyson, and navigator, 2nd Lt. Donald Sheppick, will be interred in the coming months.

The ceremonies are happening 12 years after one of Kelly's relatives, Scott Althaus, set out to solve the mystery of where exactly the plane went down.

"I'm just so grateful," he told The Associated Press. "It's been an impossible journey — just should never have been able to get to this day. And here we are, 81 years later."

MARCH 11, 1944: BOMBER DOWN

The Army Air Forces plane nicknamed Heaven Can Wait was a B-24 with a cartoon pin-up angel painted on its nose and a crew of 11 on its final flight.

They were on a mission to bomb Japanese targets when the plane was shot down. Aviators in other combat aircraft on the mission were unable to spot survivors.

Their wives, parents and siblings were of a generation that tended to be tight-lipped in their grief. But the men were sorely missed.

WWII *page 36*

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WWII *page 34*

Sheppick, 26, and Tennyson, 24, each left behind pregnant wives who would sometimes write them two or three letters a day. Darrigan, 26, also was married and had been able to attend his son's baptism while on leave. A photo shows him in uniform, smiling as he holds the boy.

Darrigan's wife, Florence, remarried but quietly held on to photos of her late husband, as well as a telegram informing her of his death.

Tennyson's wife, Jean, lived until age 96 and never remarried.

"She never stopped believing that he was going to come home," said her grandson, Scott Jefferson.

An American flag is folded during the May 24 interment ceremony for U.S. Army Air Forces Staff Sgt. Eugene Darrigan at the cemetery behind St. Mary's church in Wappingers Falls, N.Y., his hometown. Darrigan's remains were recovered from a World War II B-24 bomber that crashed off the coast of New Guinea on March 11, 1944, after being hit by enemy fire.

HEATHER KHALIFA/AP

MEMORIAL DAY 2013: THE SEARCH BEGINS

As Memorial Day approached 12 years ago, Althaus asked his mother for names of relatives who died in World War II.

Althaus, a political science and communications professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, became curious while researching World War II casualties for work. His mother gave him the name of her cousin Thomas Kelly, who was 21 years old when he was reported missing in action.

Althaus recalled that as a boy, he visited Kelly's memorial stone, which has a bomber engraved on it. He began reading up on the lost plane.

"It was a mystery that I discovered really mattered to my extended family," he said.

With help from other relatives, he analyzed historical documents, photos and eyewitness recollections. They weighed sometimes conflicting accounts of where the plane went down. After a four-year investigation, Althaus wrote a report concluding that the bomber likely crashed off of Awar Point in what is now Papua New Guinea.

The report was shared with Project Recover, a nonprofit committed to finding and repatriating missing American service members and a partner of the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, or DPAA.

A team from Project Recover, led by researchers from Scripps Institution of Oceanography, located the debris field in 2017 after searching nearly 10 square miles (27 square kilometers) of seafloor.

The DPAA launched its deepest ever underwater recovery mission in 2023.

A Navy dive team recovered dog tags, including Darrigan's partially corroded tag with the name of his wife, Florence, as an emergency contact. Kelly's ring was recovered. The stone was gone, but the word BOMBARDIER was still legible.

And they recovered remains that underwent DNA testing. Last September, the military officially accounted for Darrigan, Kelly, Sheppick and Tennyson.

With seven men who were on the plane still unaccounted for, a future DPAA mission to the site is possible.

MEMORIAL DAY 2025: BELATED HOMECOMINGS

More than 200 people honored Darrigan on May 24 in Wappingers Falls, some waving flags from the sidewalk during the procession to the church, others saluting him at a graveside ceremony under cloudy skies.

"After 80 years, this great soldier has come home to rest," Darrigan's great niece, Susan Pineiro, told mourners at his graveside.

Darrigan's son died in 2020, but his grandson, Eric Schindler, attended.

Darrigan's 85-year-old niece, Virginia Pineiro, solemnly accepted the folded flag.

Kelly's remains, which arrived in the Bay Area on May 23, were buried three days later at his family's cemetery plot, right by the marker with the bomber etched on it. A procession of Veterans of Foreign Wars motorcyclists passed by Kelly's old home and high school before he was interred.

"I think it's very unlikely that Tom Kelly's memory is going to fade soon," said Althaus, who is now a volunteer with Project Recover.

In the months ahead, Sheppick will be buried near his parents in a cemetery in Coal Center, Pennsylvania. His niece, Deborah Wineland, said she thinks her late father, Sheppick's younger brother, would have wanted it that way. The son Sheppick never met died of cancer while in high school.

Tennyson will be interred on June 27 in Wichita, Kansas. He'll be buried beside his wife, Jean, who died in 2017, just months before the wreckage was located.

"I think because she never stopped believing that he was coming back to her, that it's only fitting she be proven right," Jefferson said. ■

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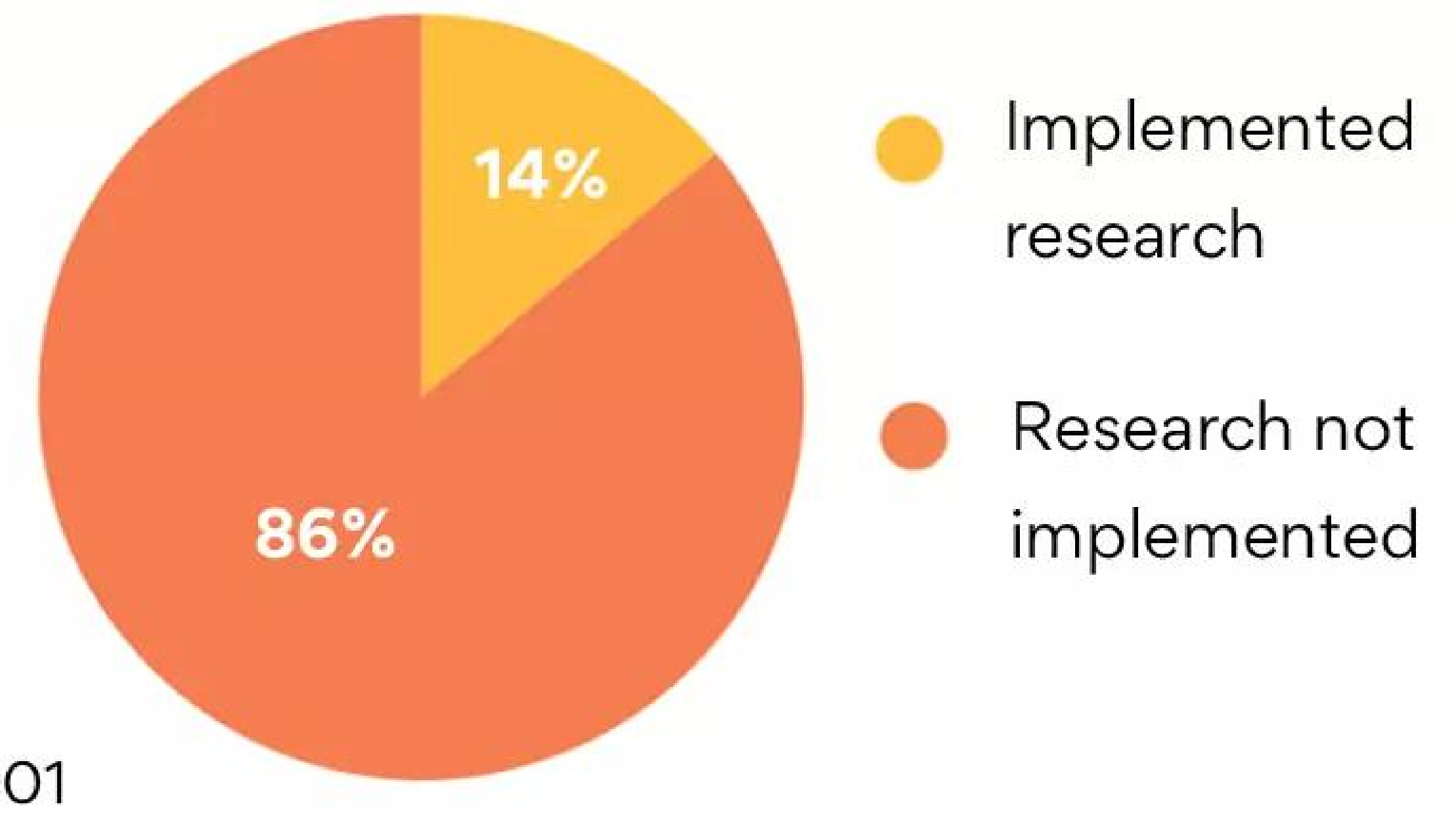
The Delay

Only 14% of research is implemented in real-world settings.
Institute of Medicine, 2001



AVERAGE LAG

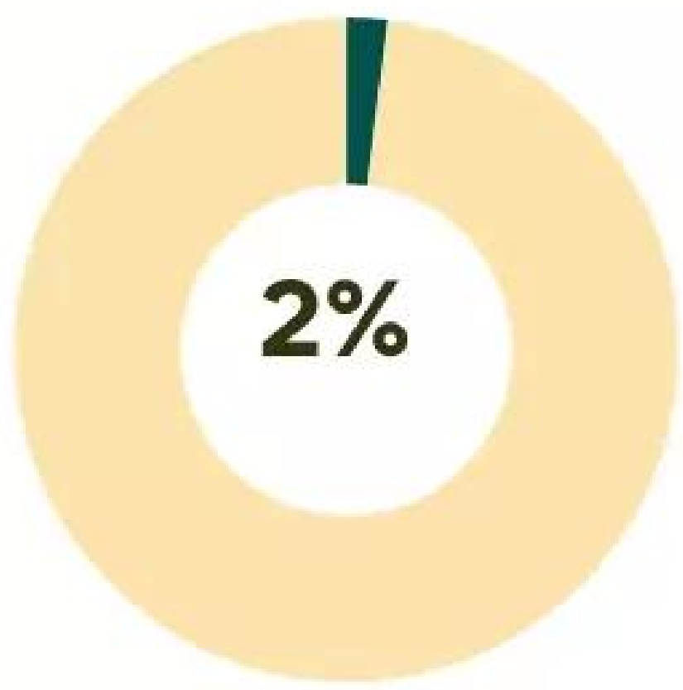
17 years from evidence to implementation

JAMA, 2023

Result: Missed opportunities to support mental and physical health and save lives

The Gap

Just **4% of RNs** demonstrated the capacity to deliver culturally competent health care to Veterans and their families.
Journal of Nursing Care Quality, 2019



Fewer than **2% of providers** with behavioral health referrals completed training to better serve Veteran patients.GAO, 2025

Result: The military-connected community faces gaps in culturally competent care.
RAND 2022

The Human Cost

1. Accident
2. Suicide
3. Cancer
4. Heart Disease

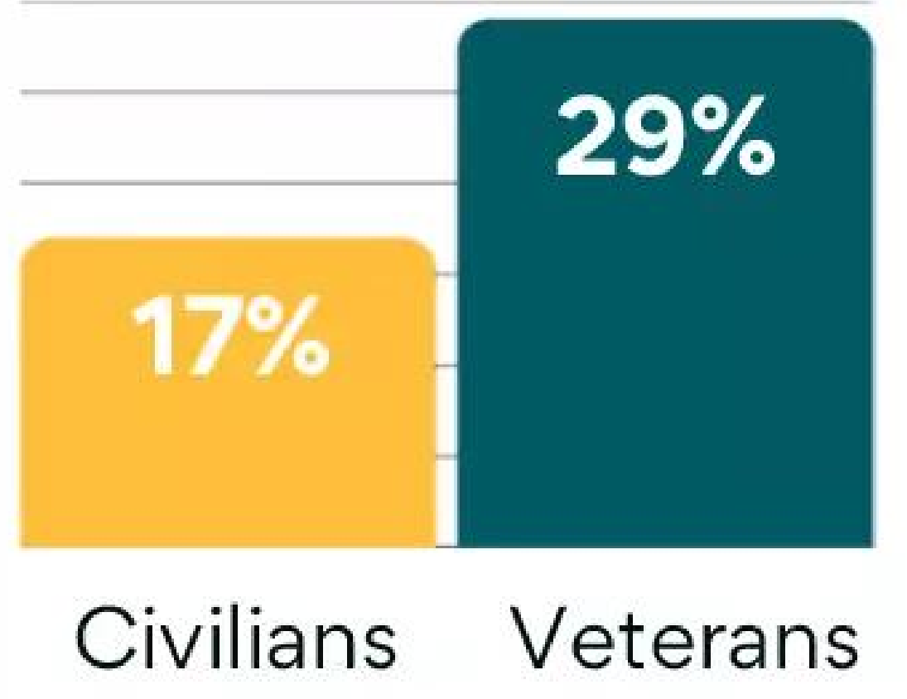
VA.gov, 2024

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for post-9/11 Veterans.

Suicide rates in the Veteran population are **59% higher** than the general population.
VA.gov 2024

Veterans are more likely to delay seeking health care than the general population.
Wolters Kluwer, 2016

Likelihood to delay seeking healthcare



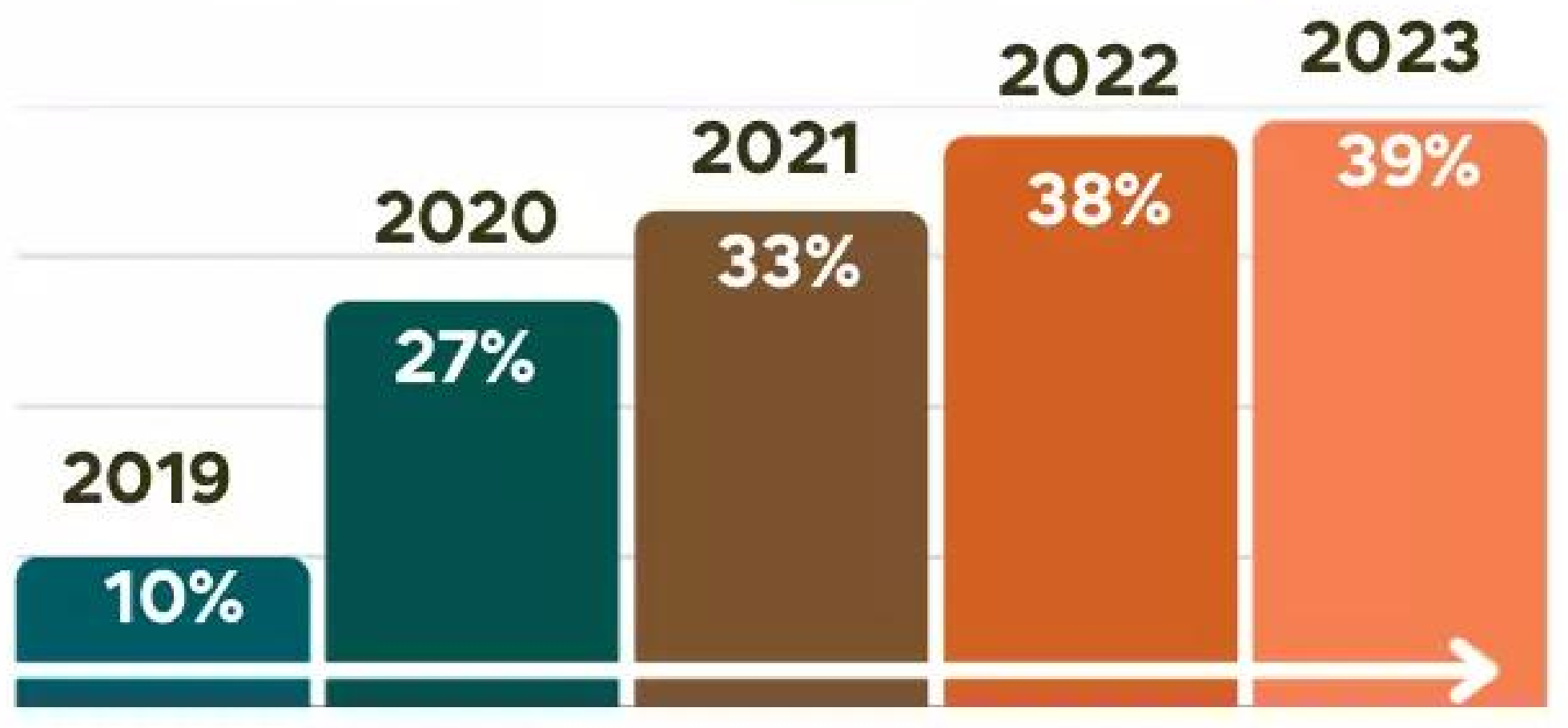
The need for community providers to understand Veterans is increasing.

More Veterans are receiving health care outside of the VA

The Community Care Program provides healthcare to 2.8 million Veterans. (2023)

$ The VA is spending more on community care year-over-year.

Percentage of VA Budgets Allocated to Community Care



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GAO, 2024

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Sonequa Martin-Green, left, and Natalie Morales star in "My Dead Friend Zoe."

KYLE HAUSMANN-STOKES/BRIARCLIFF ENTERTAINMENT

'MY DEAD FRIEND ZOE' IS A VETERAN'S GHOST STORY THAT REFUSES TO FADE

BY CLAY BEYERSDORFER,
SPECIAL TO MILITARY TIMES

"My Dead Friend Zoe" opens with the familiar image of a soldier returning home, but the weight that follows is anything but typical.

Directed by Army veteran and filmmaker Kyle Hausmann-Stokes, the film traces the uneasy civilian life of Merit, an Afghanistan war vet haunted by the ghost of her best friend and fellow soldier, Zoe.

What could've been a flat metaphor is instead a fully embodied character — Zoe isn't a hallucination. She's funny, she's maddening and she's always there. Just like grief. Just like guilt.

In his feature debut, Hausmann-Stokes doesn't try to romanticize the cost of war. This story is told from the inside, with the burden of accuracy. He served. And it shows.

That authenticity is the film's greatest strength. It doesn't wave flags or lean on clichés. Instead, it sits with discomfort — sometimes awkward, sometimes hilarious, sometimes harrowing.

"About 93% of this film is true [and] is autobiographical," Hausmann-Stokes told Military Times. "Now, I didn't see a visual manifestation of one of my dead platoon mates, but it certainly felt like that a lot of the time. … What I wanted to show was what it's like to live pre-talking about [PTSD] and what it's like to live post-talking about it. Movies are a great way to do that."

Merit, played with sharp vulnerability by Sonequa Martin-Green, is neither a victim nor a symbol. She's deeply flawed, quick to deflect with humor and struggling to hold together the fractured pieces of her life after the war.

The film's emotional axis is her dynamic with Zoe, played by Natalie Morales. Zoe is not a ghost in the traditional sense. Instead, she's a presence Merit cannot — and maybe doesn't want to — cast off. Their conversations are funny and biting, anchored in shorthand uniquely forged through shared trauma.

The scenes between them never dip into sentimentality, and that's a credit to the writing as much as the performances.

Morales plays Zoe with the breezy confidence of someone who never has to deal with consequences, because she's already dead. Martin-Green plays off that energy with tension and restraint. Together, they bring out the humor and horror of memory itself.

"[Martin-Green and Morales] both did lots of research," Hausmann-Stokes said. "Ninety percent of the people working on this film were vets, too, so they got to kind of vibe off them and me, because I was their source material. They were great."

The film, meanwhile, does not just linger in the past. Much of "My Dead Friend Zoe" progresses in group therapy sessions. These scenes are notable not just for their content, but for how they were made — largely unscripted and performed by actual veterans. The result is as raw as it is unpredictable.

Every interaction has an edge, a kind of unspoken understanding that can only come from lived experience. It's the closest any recent film has come to capturing what a real vet therapy group might sound like — half sarcasm, half survival.

"In not writing dialogue for the veterans, it really revealed how, if you just create the circumstances, it's pretty amazing what comes out," Hausmann-Stokes said. "It was pretty cool — we were making a movie and doing therapy at the same time."

Ed Harris brings quiet weight as Merit's aging grandfather, a Vietnam veteran himself. His scenes with Martin-Green crackle with intergenerational tension, a reminder that war's ghosts rarely die with the soldier.

Morgan Freeman, in a more subdued but crucial role, serves as the anchor of the therapy group, his presence adding gravity without stealing scenes. Both characters challenge Merit to confront not just her trauma, but her complicity in holding onto it.

The film's technical execution leans toward realism — minimal score, natural lighting, handheld camera work — but it also knows when to break form.

Dream sequences bleed into the mundane, memory interrupts the present and conversations with a dead friend happen

Kyle Hausmann-Stokes

KYLE HAUSMANN-STOKES/BRIARCLIFF ENTERTAINMENT

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mid-laundry. Hausmann-Stokes isn't trying to create spectacle; he's showing how trauma rewires a life.

"In the military, it's a world where we try to control everything we can, and there's routine which gives us some comfort because you can't control war or a mission or things like that," he said. "I think once a lot of us get out into the civilian sector, it's hard, man. I think people drastically underestimate that the civilian world is so much harder than the military in so many ways.

"So, when Merit gets some bad news or has some emotions bubbling up that she can't deal with, yes, she's going to revert to that routine, that system. 'How can I exert some control in this moment?' And then Charlie Mike."

What makes "My Dead Friend Zoe" particularly resonant for the military community is its refusal to resolve neatly. There's no "moment of triumph," no discharge papers for the psyche.

The film is more interested in how people live with the aftermath — how they function, or fail to, long after the uniform comes off. It portrays PTSD not as a cinematic explosion, but as a slow erosion. And yet, it's not hopeless.

There are moments of levity that land surprisingly hard. Zoe's commentary often cuts through Merit's self-seriousness. A recurring bit about running — both literal and emotional — becomes one of the film's most potent metaphors. This isn't a trauma dump; it's a story about staying alive with the things that won't leave you.

"I want us as a country, as a species, to talk about [post-traumatic growth] more. How the hard things that we live through, that we survive — we are not weaker because of them. We're not victims to them. We're stronger because of them," Hausmann-Stokes said. "You realize that you can persevere and that you're stronger for it. Whether you're at war … or you lose somebody.

"Veterans don't own PTSD," Hausmann-Stokes added with a laugh, "we just might be the best at it."

Critically, the film depicts women's unique challenges in uniform. Merit's story reflects a seldom-seen perspective in war films, and it's long overdue.

Her struggles aren't simply about battlefield memories — they're about being unheard, unseen and misunderstood by the system she served. The film handles this without preachiness, trusting its characters to carry the weight.

"I didn't serve alongside women when I was in the military. I was in the infantry; I was in combat arms. At that time, women couldn't serve in combat arms roles. That's now changed, but I didn't have that experience," Hausmann-Stokes said.

"I was directing a big campaign for the VA called 'Make the Connection.' I interviewed close to 500 vets across the country. I met so many female veterans who just blew my mind with their stories and what they had done. After doing that, [casting female leads] wasn't even a choice for me."

Ultimately, "My Dead Friend Zoe" doesn't aim to be definitive. It doesn't pretend to speak for all veterans. It tells one story — specific, strange and deeply personal — and lets that truth resonate.

That might be its greatest strength. The trauma is real, but so is the humor. The ghosts are persistent, but so is the need to learn from them and grow.

This film isn't just a must-watch, it's a necessary one. ■

"My Dead Friend Zoe" is available to rent or buy on the Apple Store, Amazon Prime and all major VOD platforms. www.mydeadfriendzoemovie.com

MICHAEL MORIATIS/KYLE HAUSMANN-STOKES/BRIARCLIFF ENTERTAINMENT

Sonequa Martin-Green, right, stars as Merit and Natalie Morales as Zoe in the new movie "My Dead Friend Zoe."

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Recruit Luke Humphrey receives a haircut aboard Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., Sept. 24, 2024.

CPL. AVA ALEGRIA/MARINE CORPS

US SPENT $6 BILLION IN THE PAST 3 YEARS TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN TROOPS

BY LOLITA C. BALDOR,
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The U.S. military spent more than $6 billion over the past three years to recruit and retain service members, in what has been a growing campaign to counter enlistment shortfalls.

The financial incentives to reenlist in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps increased dramatically from 2022 through 2024, with the Navy vastly outspending the others, according to funding totals provided by the services. The overall amount of recruiting bonuses also rose steadily, fueled by significant jumps in spending by the Army and Marine Corps.

The military services have routinely poured money into recruiting and retention bonuses over the years. But the totals spiked as Pentagon leaders tried to reverse falling enlistment numbers, particularly as COVID-19 restrictions locked down public events, fairs and school visits that recruiters relied on to meet with young people.

Coupled with an array of new programs, an increased number of recruiters and adjustments to enlistment requirements, the additional incentives have helped the services bounce back from the shortfalls. All but the Navy met their recruiting targets last year and all are expected to do so this year.

President Donald Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth repeatedly point to Trump's election as a reason for the recruiting rebound. But the enlistment increases began long before last November, and officials have tied them more directly to the widespread overhauls that the services have done, including the increased financial incentives.

The Army, the military's largest service, spent more on recruiting bonuses in 2022 and 2024 than the other branches. But it was significantly outspent by the Navy in 2023, when the sea service was struggling to overcome a large enlistment shortfall.

As a result, even though the Navy is a smaller service, it spent more overall in the three years than the Army did.

The Navy also has spent considerably more than the other services to entice sailors to reenlist, doling out retention bonuses to roughly 70,000 service members for each of the past three years.

That total is more than double the number of troops to whom the Army gave retention bonuses each year.

RECRUIT *page 44*

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RECRUIT *page 42*

"The Navy is dedicated to retaining our most capable sailors; retention is a critical component of achieving our end-strength goals," Adm. James Kilby, the vice chief of naval operations, told a Senate Armed Services subcommittee in March.

Sailor reenlistment "remains healthy," he said, but officer retention continues to present a challenge in specific career fields, including aviation, explosive ordnance disposal, surface and submarine warfare, the health professions and naval special operations. He added that the Navy has struggled to fill all of its at-sea jobs and is using financial incentives as one way to combat the problem.

The Army has seen the greatest recruiting struggles over the past decade, and by using a range of new programs and policies has had one of the largest comebacks. The Navy has had the most trouble more recently, and took a number of steps to expand those eligible for service and spend more in bonuses.

While the Army spends hundreds of millions each year to recruit troops, it also has relied on an array of new programs and policies to woo young people. A key driver of the Army's rebound has been its decision to create the Future Soldier Prep Course at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in August 2022.

That program gives lower-performing recruits up to 90 days of academic or fitness instruction to help them meet military standards and move on to basic training. It has resulted in thousands of enlistments.

The Air Force increased its spending on recruiting bonuses in 2023 as it also struggled to overcome shortfalls, but lowered the amount the following year. The payments were for jobs including munitions systems, aircraft maintenance and security forces. The Space Force does not currently authorize enlistment bonuses.

The Marine Corps and the tiny Space Force have consistently hit their recruiting goals, although the Marines had to dig deep into their pool of delayed entry candidates in 2022 to meet their target. The Corps, which is much smaller than the Army and Air Force, spends the least on bonuses and tends to spread the amount among a larger number of service members.

Maj. Jacoby Getty, a Marine spokesman, said the spike in retention bonuses from $126 million in 2023 to $201 million in 2024 was because Marines were allowed to reenlist a year early for the first time. More than 7,000 Marines got bonuses as a result, a jump of nearly 2,200 over the previous year.

When asked about bonuses in 2023, Gen. Eric Smith, the Marine commandant, famously told attendees at a naval conference that "your bonus is you get to call yourself a Marine."

"That's your bonus, right?" Smith said. "There's no dollar amount that goes with that."

The services tailor their recruiting and retention money to bolster harder-to-fill jobs, including cyber, intelligence and special operations forces. The Army and Marine Corps also use the money to woo troops to some combat, armor and artillery jobs. ■

Recruits line up at the Navy's boot camp at Great Lakes, Ill.

MC2 CHRISTOPHER M. O'GRADY/U.S. NAVY

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ILL-FATED GAZA PIER MISSION LACKED SUFFICIENT TRAINING, EQUIPMENT: IG

BY HOPE HODGE SECK

In March 2024, then-President Joe Biden announced the U.S. would create a new pathway for international aid into war-torn Gaza: a floating pier system operated by the Army and Navy known as Joint Logistics Over-the-Shore, or JLOTS.

Construction of the pier began that same month, but it was unceremoniously shut down in July amid equipment failures and insurmountable sea conditions, after being active for just 20 days.

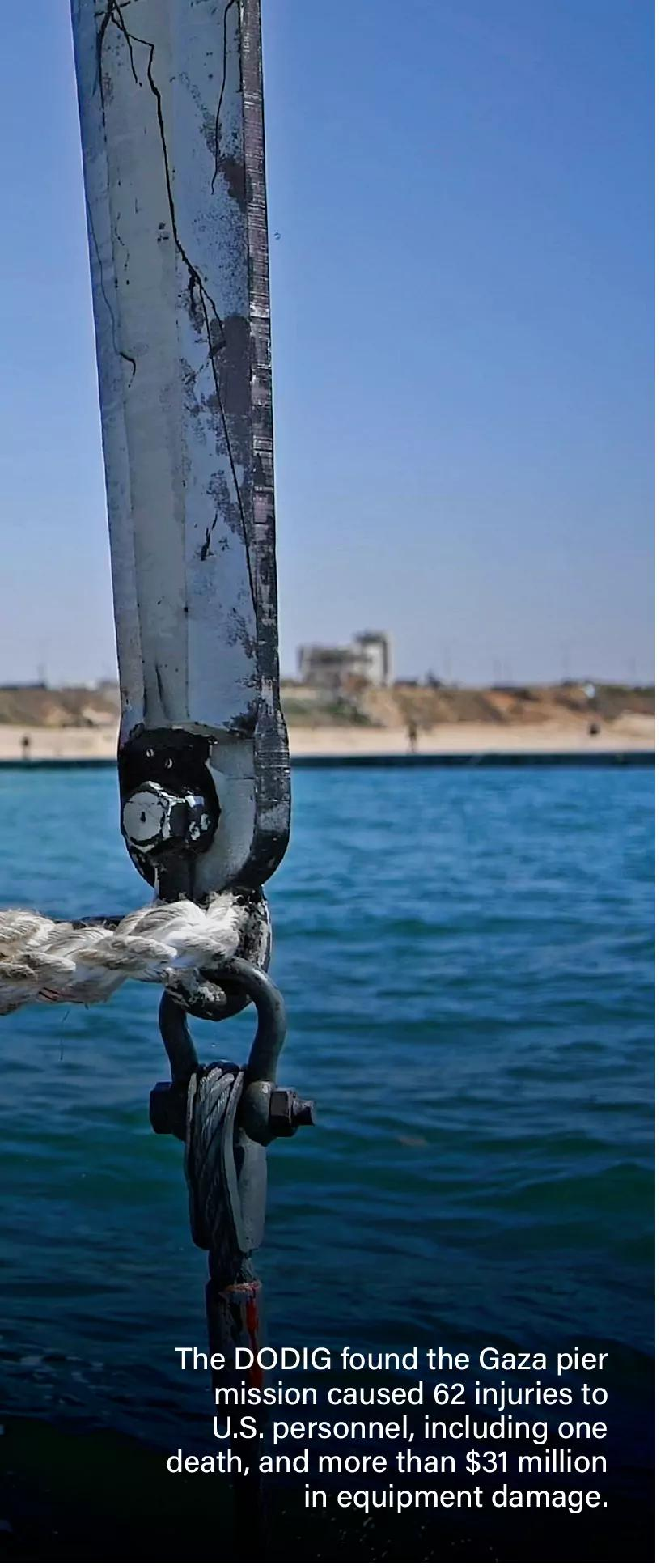
A new report from the Defense Department's independent watchdog reveals just how ill-prepared the military services were to build the floating pier to Gaza. It found, among other things, mission planners failed to identify environmental factors, such as beach conditions and sea states, likely to affect the success of JLOTS; Army and Navy equipment was not interoperable and caused damage when combined; and cuts to training and resources further challenged the operation's success.

The DOD Office of Inspector General report, dated May 2, recommends: the creation of a new working group focused on JLOTS; a report to the defense secretary and the Joint Staff identifying gaps in its capabilities; and better communication between the services, particularly through U.S. Transportation Command, which coordinated the mission.

The JLOTS pier, built under the mission name Operation Neptune Solace, was not a complete failure. During its brief operational period, it delivered 19.4 million pounds of food aid to Gaza, enough to feed half a million Palestinian civilians for a month. But the IG found that its usefulness was badly curtailed by planning and resourcing failures, some of which had been observed for years prior to the mission.

While DOD had run 11 JLOTS exercises in the decade prior to the Gaza operation, the 84-page report found, neither the Army nor the Navy JLOTS packages met service standards for mission readiness, including equipment mission-capable rates. The actual readiness rates and unit manning shortages are redacted in the report, but it does note that the lack of resourcing had clear consequences.

"According to [U.S. Army 7th Transportation Brigade (Expeditionary)] officials, manning shortages delayed the deployment of some Army watercraft for Operation Neptune Solace," investigators wrote.



The DODIG found the Gaza pier mission caused 62 injuries to U.S. personnel, including one death, and more than $31 million in equipment damage.

The U.S. Army-Navy humanitarian aid pier was built in the Mediterranean Sea, near Gaza City.

STAFF SGT. MALCOLM COHENS-ASHLEY/ARMY

Officials with Navy Beach Group One said the unit "had to pull together every person they could to sufficiently staff vessels in accordance with Navy requirements," according to investigators.

Between 2018 and 2023, the Army and Navy had completed major divestments of equipment the JLOTS system required, including roughly half the Army's watercraft, or 64 out of 134, and one of the Navy's two JLOTS-capable units, Amphibious Construction Battalion 2, the report stated. Officials in units involved with the deployment to Gaza "expressed concern at the services' divestment of JLOTS capabilities and stated their belief that the DOD's current JLOTS capabilities were not sufficient to meet projected needs."

The JLOTS training that did occur at the DOD level did not try to trouble-shoot a major problem with the Gaza deployment: the fact that the Army and Navy equipment was not meant to be used together. Both Army and Navy officials, the report said, had cited issues with the other service's pier gear.

The Improved Navy Lighterage System, or INLS, and the Army's roll-on, roll-off discharge facility — both versions of floating docks — sat at different heights in the water. The Navy gear warped Army boat ramps, while the Army boats punched "a bunch of holes" into Navy docks, officials told investigators.

An image published in the report shows an Army vessel with gouges in the base and the words "total loss" spray-painted on the side.

While the Army's damage assessment is redacted, the Navy reported damage to 27 boats and INLS equipment totaling about $31 million.

U.S. Central Command reported that 62 U.S. personnel were injured during Neptune Solace, the IG reported, although the manner of the injuries and how they took place was not provided.

One service member died as a result of brain injuries sustained during noncombat duties on the mission. Army Sgt. Quandarius Stanley died in October after being critically injured in May when high winds and heavy seas damaged the pier, causing four Army vessels to become beached, The Associated Press reported at the time.

Army and Navy communication systems weren't interoperable either, the report found — a problem highlighted in earlier JLOTS exercises. As a result, the services were sometimes left without secure communications, according to the IG.

On top of insufficient training and equipping, planning also fell short, the IG found. Despite clear sea-state limits established for JLOTS, planners in the services and Geographic Combatant Commands "did not fully identify or consider mission-specific requirements, such as beach conditions, average sea states, and other factors likely to affect the ability to successfully conduct a JLOTS operation," and lacked information specific to the Gaza region.

The report recommended the Army and the Navy individually review their JLOTS capabilities and determine what changes need to be made to meet mission requirements. It also called on U.S. Transportation Command to develop JLOTS mission-essential task lists and establish other measures to ensure JLOTS missions had the resources they needed.

Service leaders agreed to the recommendation. While TRANSCOM partially concurred, the IG stated the command's responses did not address how it planned to better fulfill its coordinating responsibilities for JLOTS. It requested TRANSCOM submit a full report detailing such a plan within 30 days. ■

U.S. Marine Gen. Michael Langley and Moroccan Royal Armed Forces Maj. Gen. Mohammed Berrid attend the African Lion military exercise in Morocco, May 23.

MOSA'AB ELSHAMY/AP

US MILITARY CHANGES TONE IN AFRICA, URGES BURDEN-SHARING AMONG ALLIES

BY SAM METZ,
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The U.S. military is backing off its usual talk of good governance and countering insurgencies' underlying causes, instead leaning into a message that its fragile allies in Africa must be ready to stand more on their own.

At African Lion, the United States' largest joint training exercise on the continent, that shift was clear.

"We need to be able to get our partners to the level of independent operations," said U.S. Marine Gen. Michael Langley in an interview with The Associated Press.

"There needs to be some burden sharing," said Langley, the head of U.S. Africa Command, on May 23, the final day of the exercise in Morocco.

For four weeks, troops from more than 40 countries rehearsed how to confront threats by air, land and sea. They flew drones, simulated close-quarters combat and launched satellite-guided rockets in the desert.

Maneuvers mirrored previous editions of African Lion, now in its 21st year. But mostly gone now is language that emphasizes ideas the U.S. once argued set it apart from Russia and China.

Messaging about the interwoven work of defense, diplomacy and development once formed the core of Washington's security pitch. In their place now are calls for helping allies to build capacity to manage their own security, which Langley said is a priority for President Donald Trump's Defense Department.

"We have our set priorities now — protecting the homeland. And we're also looking for other countries to contribute to some of these global instability areas," Langley said, referencing U.S. support for Sudan.

The shift comes as the U.S. military makes moves to "build a leaner, more lethal force," potentially including cuts to U.S. military leadership positions in places like Africa, where America's rivals continue to deepen their influence.

China has launched its own expansive training program for African militaries. Meanwhile, Russian mercenaries are recalibrating and cementing their role as security partner of choice throughout North, West and Central Africa.

In an interview a year ago, Langley emphasized what U.S. military officials have long called a "whole of government approach" to countering insurgency. Even amid setbacks, he defended the U.S. approach and said force alone couldn't stabilize weak states and protect U.S. interests against the risk of violence spilling out.

"I've always professed that AFRICOM is not just a military organization," Langley said last year. He called good governance an "enduring solution to a number of layered threats — whether it be desertification, whether it be crop failure from changing environments, or whether it be from violent extremist organizations."

The "whole of government approach" no longer occupies the same place at the center of U.S. messaging, though Langley

AFRICA *page 50*

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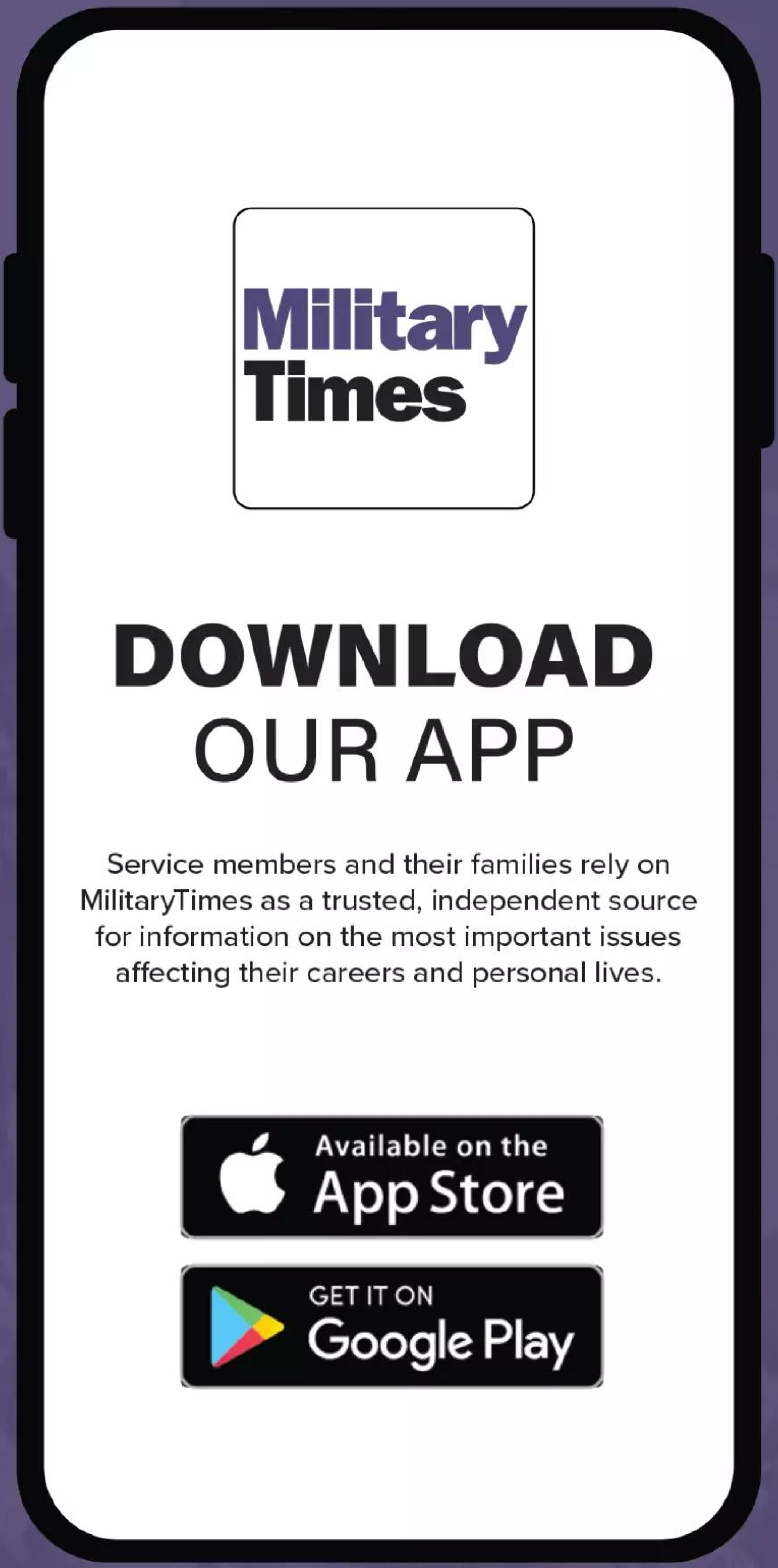

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Security officers patrol near the destroyed Hayat Hotel after a deadly 30-hour siege by al-Shabab militants in Mogadishu, Somalia, on Aug. 21, 2022.

HASSAN ALI ELMI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

AFRICA *page 48*

said holistic efforts have worked in places like Ivory Coast, where development coupled with defense had reduced attacks by jihadi groups near its volatile northern border.

But such successes aren't a pattern.

"I've seen progression, and I've seen regression," said Langley, who is scheduled to exit his post later this year.

AS THE US STEPS BACK, INSURGENCIES GAIN GROUND

The U.S. military's new posture comes even though many African armies remain ill-equipped and insurgent groups expand.

"We see Africa as the epicenter for both al-Qaida and Islamic State," a senior U.S. defense official said earlier this month, noting both groups had growing regional affiliates and the Islamic State group had shifted command and control to Africa. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to discuss the issue publicly.

Africa has rarely ranked high on the Pentagon's list of priorities, but the U.S. has still spent hundreds of millions of dollars on security assistance and has roughly 6,500 Africa Command personnel on the continent.

In some regions, the U.S. faces direct competition from Russia and China. In others, regional affiliates of al-Qaida and the IS still require direct military action, Langley said.

The messaging shift from "whole of government" to more burden-sharing comes as fears grow that rising violence could spread beyond hot spots where insurgents have expanded influence and found vacuums in which they can consolidate power.

In 2024, more than half of the world's terrorism victims were killed across the Sahel, a vast semi-arid region of western and north-central Africa extending from Senegal to Sudan and ruled by military juntas, according to the Institute for Economics and Peace.

The group, which compiles yearly terrorism statistics, also found Somalia accounted for 6% of all terrorism-related deaths, making it the deadliest for terrorism in Africa outside the Sahel.

Since Trump took office, the U.S. military has escalated airstrikes in Somalia, targeting IS and al-Shabab operatives. But despite air support, Somalia's army remains far from being able to maintain security on the ground, Langley acknowledged.

"The Somali National Army is trying to find their way," Langley said, adding that they had regained some footing after years of setbacks. "There are some things they still need on the battlefield to be very effective."

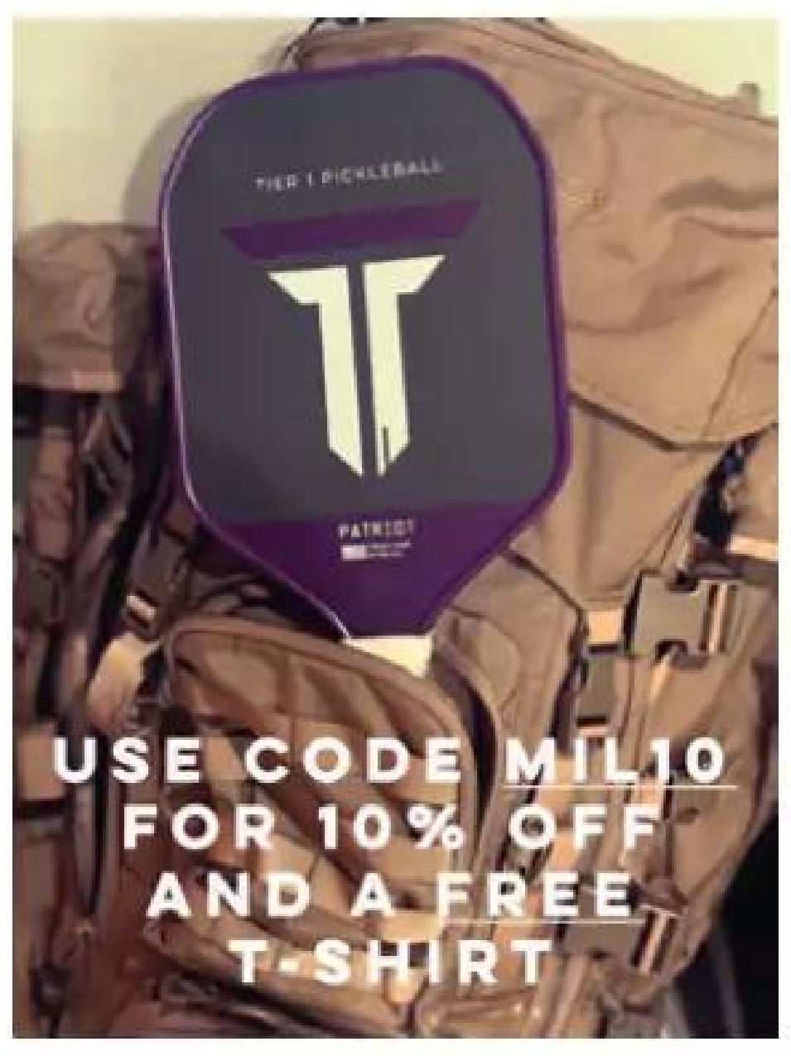
Similarly in West Africa, the notion that states could soon have the capacity to counter such threats is a distant prospect, said Beverly Ochieng, an analyst at Control Risks, a security consulting firm.

Even before Western influence began to wane in the Sahel, needed military support was limited, threats remained active and local militaries were left without the tools to confront them.

Western powers with a presence in the Sahel have gradually scaled back their engagement, either by choice or after being pushed out by increasingly hostile governments.

"Many of them do not have very strong air forces and are not able to monitor the movement of militants, especially in areas where roads are very difficult to traverse, the infrastructure is extremely poor," said Ochieng, who specializes in the Sahel and Great Power competition in Africa. ■

VETERANS' SPOTLIGHT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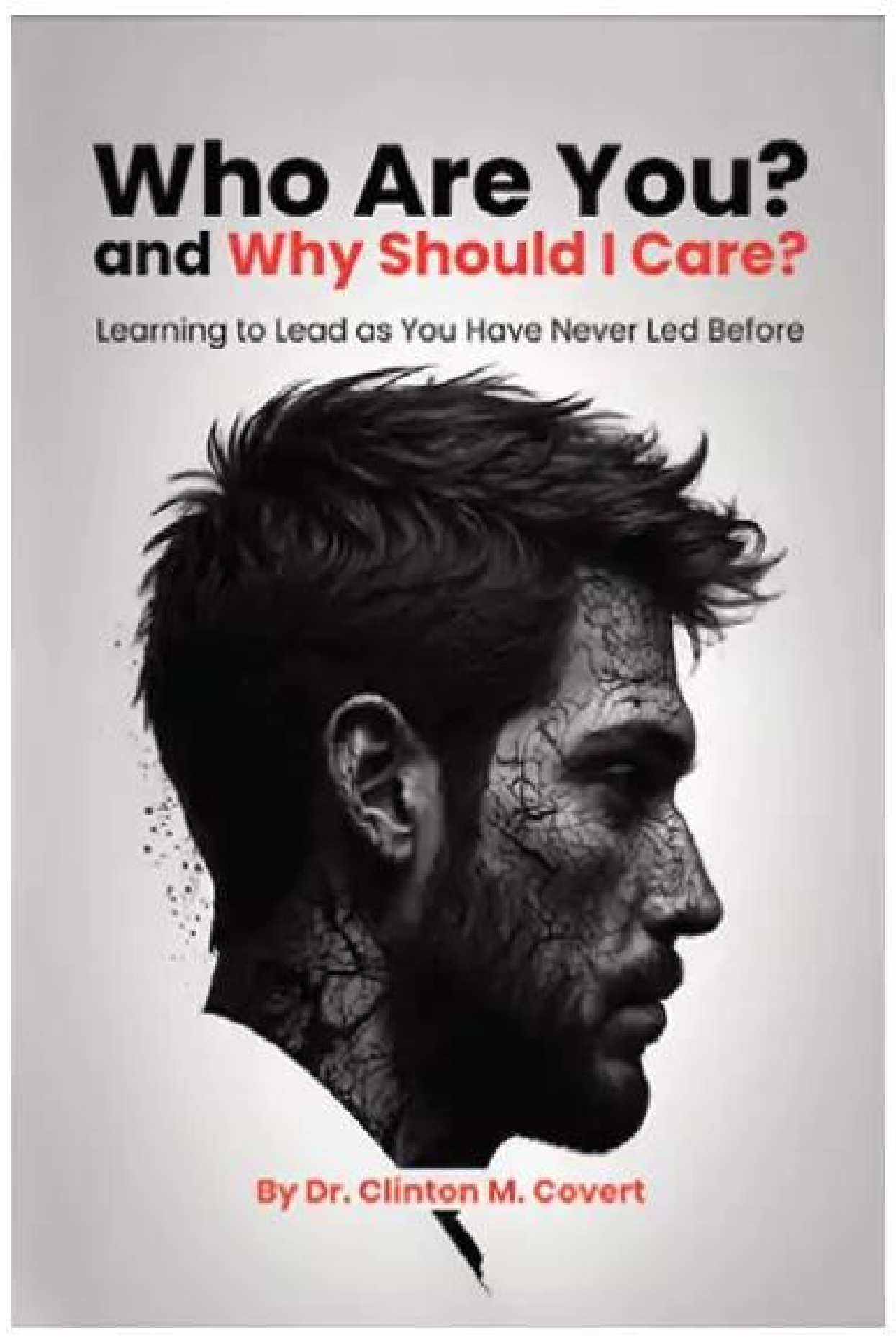
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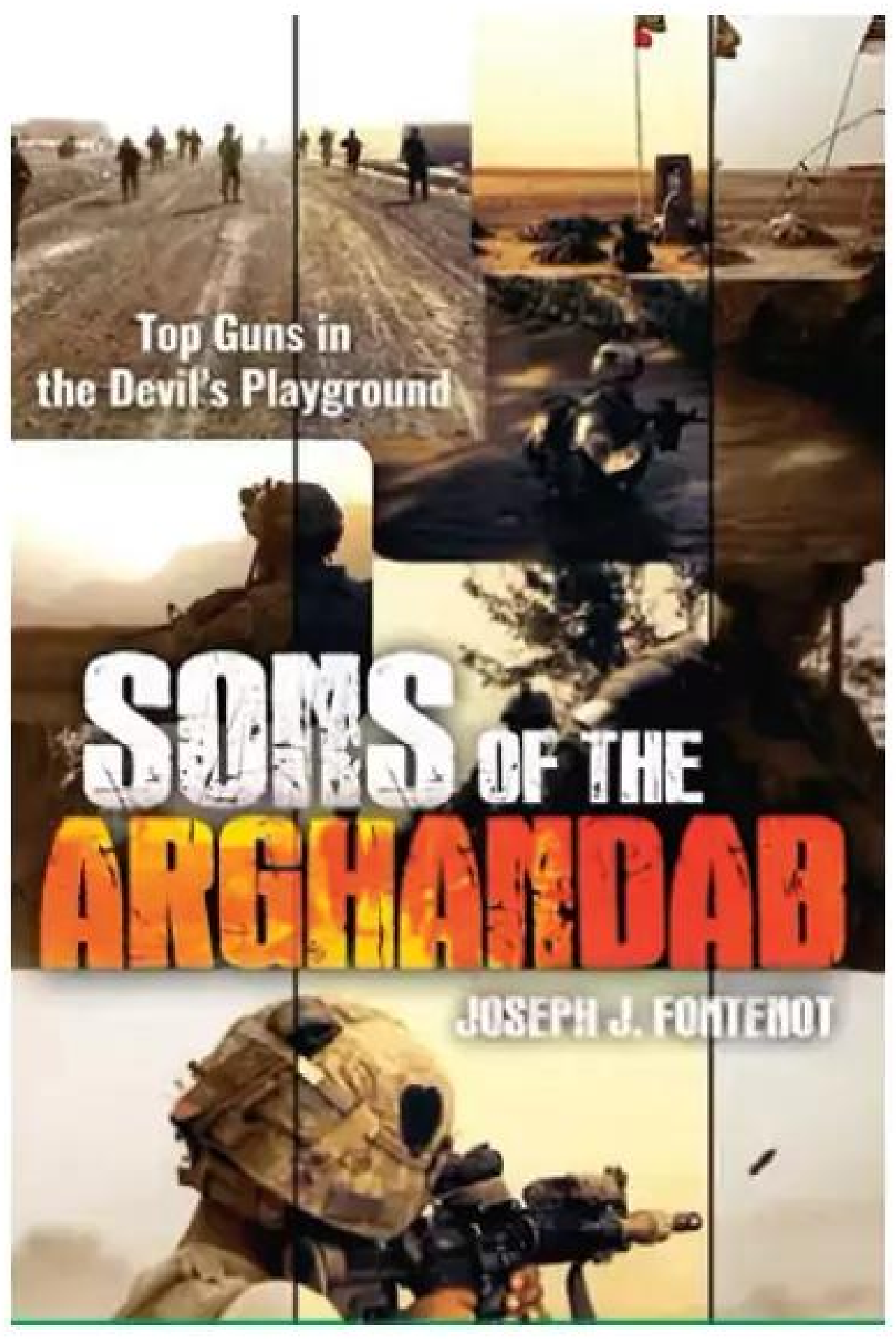
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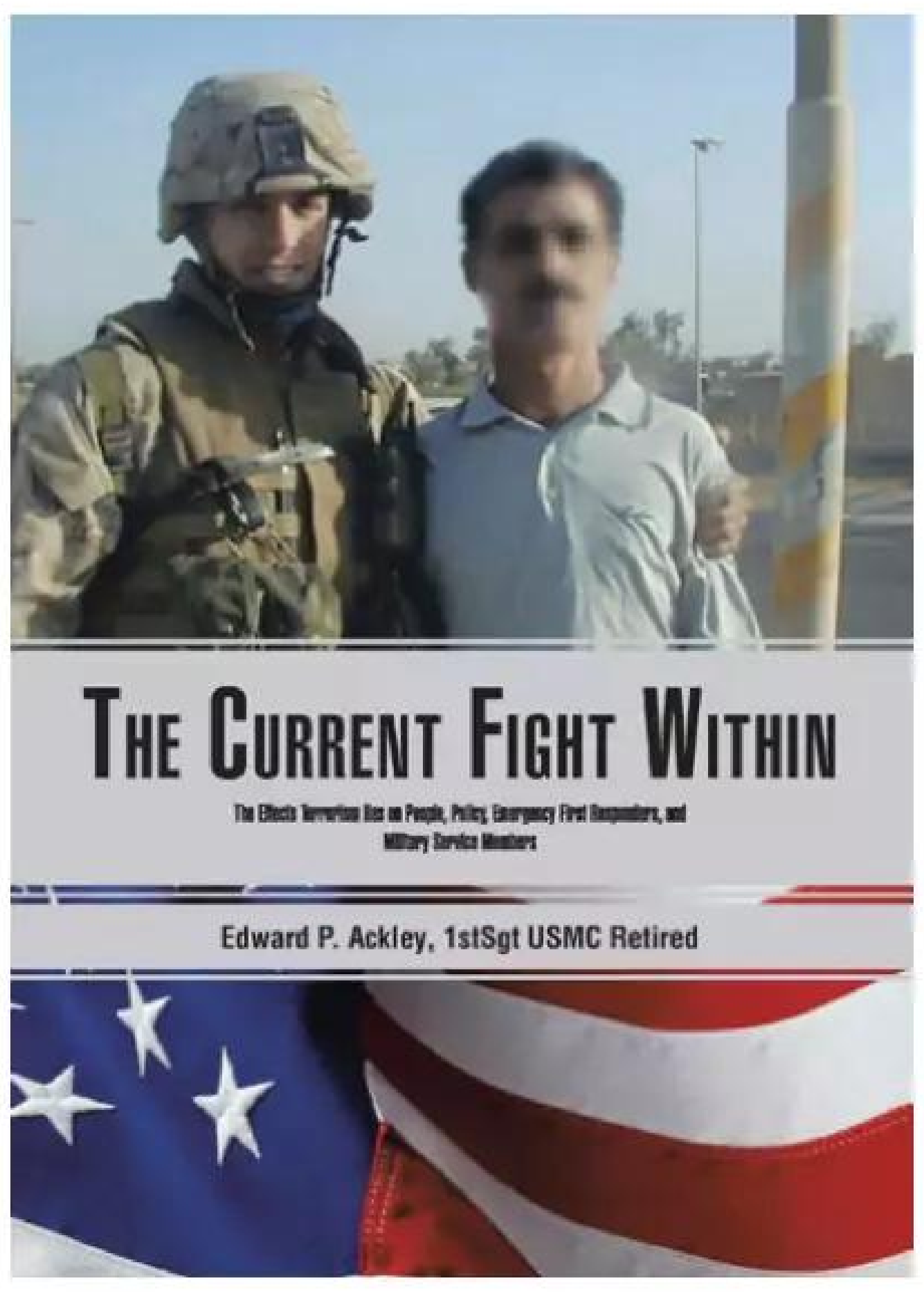
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The Effects Terrorism Has on People, Policy, Emergency First Responders, and Military Service Members
Edward P. Ackley, 1stSgt USMC Retired

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Drawing on personal experience in law enforcement, antiterrorism and infantry in the Marine Corps, Ackley explores the effects terrorism has on people, policy, emergency first responders, and military service members.

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NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte shakes hands with DOD personnel as U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, right, looks on at the Pentagon in April.

BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

PENTAGON'S UKRAINE HUB COULD SEE DOWNGRADE IN POLICY OFFICE RESHUFFLE

BY NOAH ROBERTSON

The Pentagon is likely to downgrade a policy office instrumental in the military's response to the war in Ukraine, according to three former U.S. defense officials and two European officials.

As part of a larger reshuffle of the Pentagon's policy apparatus, the office dedicated to Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia affairs would be shifted under a separate office that handles Europe and NATO issues, the sources said.

Doing so wouldn't stop its work or necessarily involve firing employees. Still, the shift would demote an office that until earlier this year had become one of the most important in the Pentagon.

Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the once relatively obscure office has helped shape U.S. policy toward the war and manage the vast sum of military aid sent to help support its self-defense.

Laura Cooper, its previous director, helped convene representatives of 50 countries that have met 27 times to raise and coordinate more than $130 billion in security assistance to Kyiv, with around half of that coming from the United States.

A Defense Department spokesperson didn't confirm the potential change, explain the rationale behind it or say whether any positions may be cut. Cooper departed the Pentagon in December, and a career civil servant now leads the office in an acting capacity.

Both offices report to the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, which currently lacks a fully confirmed director. Daniel Zimmerman, the nominee to lead it, is awaiting a full Senate vote.

Multiple sources stressed that the decision is not yet final, and that any changes would be part of a larger reorganization. It's not unusual for new policy chiefs to shift around their offices, one former official said, but multiple other sources saw the potential change as a sign of the Pentagon's overall decision to assign lower-priority to Ukraine under the second Trump administration.

Elbridge Colby, the Pentagon's policy chief, has long argued that America should reduce its military support for Ukraine and shift resources toward Asia to deter China from invading Taiwan.

When visiting NATO headquarters in February, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth argued that Europe needs to take control of its own security, including for Ukraine.

"Leaders of our European allies should take primary responsibility for defense of the continent," Hegseth said.

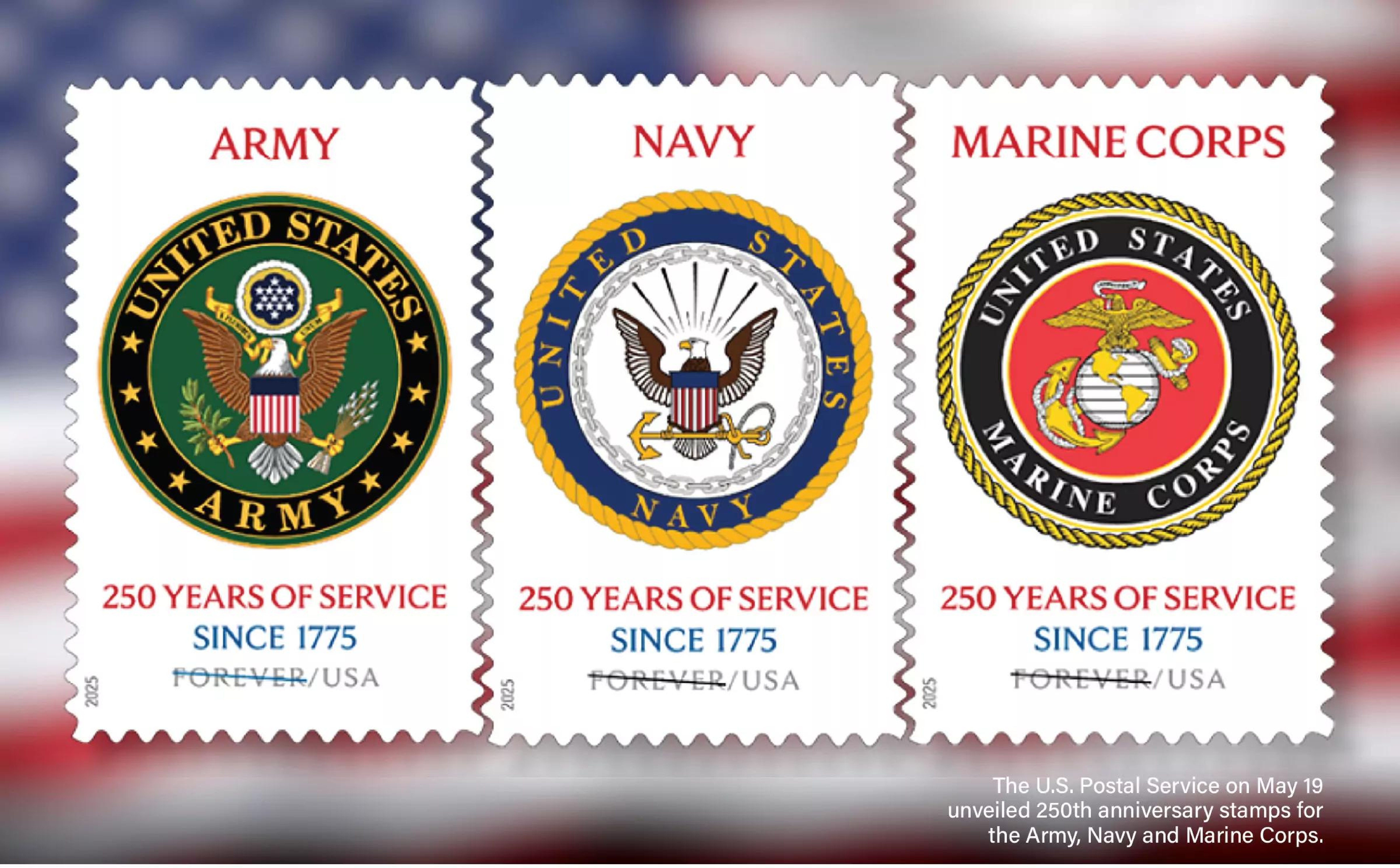
As a practical matter, two former U.S. officials raised the concern that combining the offices would overwhelm the person in charge.

The Trump administration is considering drastic changes to U.S. security policy toward Europe, arguing countries on the continent should spend far more on their defense as America refocuses elsewhere. Meetings with David Baker, the official now leading the Europe and NATO office, have been in high demand as European countries try to understand the coming changes and prepare for the June NATO summit.

"It will be very hard for a single DASD to handle that many important [and] high maintenance countries," a former U.S. defense official said, referring to a deputy assistant secretary of defense, or mid-level Pentagon official.

After a weeklong pause in March, the U.S. is still sharing intelligence with Ukraine and shipping previously scheduled aid. But Congress hasn't approved any more money to continue the effort, and the Pentagon hasn't asked for any.

The Defense Department has a little under $4 billion left in authority to ship weapons to Ukraine, but no money left to replace anything it sends. ■



The U.S. Postal Service on May 19 unveiled 250th anniversary stamps for the Army, Navy and Marine Corps.

U.S. POSTAL SERVICE

USPS UNVEILS 250TH ANNIVERSARY STAMPS HONORING MILITARY BRANCHES

BY TODD SOUTH

The U.S. Postal Service is honoring the Army, Navy and Marine Corps with commemorative stamps to mark 250 years of service. Each of the three stamps features the name and seal of the military service, and the inscription “250 Years of Service/ Since 1775.”

The stamps were unveiled May 23 during a ceremony at Freedom Plaza in Washington, D.C. They were designed by Antonio Alcalá, an art director for the USPS.

The three military-themed stamps are in the “Forever” class of postage and can be used to send a one-ounce first-class letter, regardless of the current price of first-class postage, according to the release.

“Service isn’t about a uniform. It’s about impact. It’s about showing up. It’s about standing up when it matters the most,” said USPS spokesperson Jeffery Adams, an Army veteran. “As we honor 250 years of military service … we also recognize those who are serving right now all over the world and keeping our freedoms alive.”

Army Inspector General Lt. Gen. Gregory J. Brady noted the USPS itself has always contributed to troop morale.

“Today’s important commemoration should not close without recognizing the huge morale booster that the Postal Service has been to our military,” he said. “Generations of military personnel serving in foreign lands … [have] always cherished those two words when [their] first sergeant is coming in with that big bag. Those two words are ‘Mail call!’ [It’s] the high point of their months and years away from home. Mr. Postmaster General, Team USPS, thank you.”

Vice Adm. Michael Boyle, director of Navy staff, noted the special relationship between the Navy and the USPS.

“[This] partnership … has spanned nearly two and a half centuries,” Boyle said. “You have well and faithfully delivered mail to ships on the far side of the world, always finding a way to keep people connected, no matter the distance. Letters and care packages from friends and family delivered to our deployed sailors at sea make an immense difference.”

Providing a personal note, Lt. Gen. Paul Rock Jr. director of Marine Corps staff, shared how the USPS has played a role in his military service.

“I still have letters that my wife wrote me when I was a young first lieutenant overseas on my first shipboard deployment, and I cherish the pictures that came through the mail from my children the first time I went to war — precious memories made possible by the United States Postal Service,” Rock said.

“That connection remains strong to this day, and I thank the USPS for helping us share this great milestone with all Americans. These stamps will travel around the world and across our nation, carrying with them the message of patriotism, service and unwavering dedication.” ■

FROM SPACE TO BARBED WIRE, MUSEUMS WELCOME MILITARY FAMILIES FOR FREE

BY KAREN JOWERS

Want to get an in-depth look inside the space shuttle trainer crew compartment at the Museum of Flight in Seattle? Or explore more than 2,000 varieties of barbed wire at the Kansas Barbed Wire Museum? Then check out this year's Blue Star Museums program, with free opportunities for military families around the country.

About 2,000 museums are offering free admission to currently serving military personnel and up to five family members now through Sept. 1, Labor Day. Participating museums, large and small, can be found in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and Guam. They include history, art and children's museums; historic sites; botanical gardens; zoos; aquariums; and more.

"For 15 years, Blue Star Museums has opened doors for military families to explore, connect and feel at home in their communities," said Kathy Roth-Douquet, CEO of Blue Star Families, in an announcement of this year's launch.

"Thanks to our continued partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts and participating museums nationwide, we're proud to continue this tradition of belonging and enrichment. Museums are more than cultural spaces — they're places where military families feel seen, welcomed and celebrated."

Some museums could provide interesting day trips. With some planning, they could also provide side trips during summer travel, such as during a move to a new duty station.

Additional information and a complete list of participating organizations are available at arts.gov/initiatives/blue-star-museums, where you can search by museum and state. Museums can join the Blue Star Museums program all summer long and the map will be updated regularly.

Those eligible for free admission are currently serving members of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Space Force and Coast Guard, including the reserves and the National Guard, the U.S. Public Health Commissioned Corps, NOAA Commissioned Corps, and up to five family members. Qualified members must show a military ID for entrance into a participating Blue Star Museum.

Spouses can show their dependent ID card for free admission if their service member is deployed or otherwise unable to come to the museum.

"The National Endowment for the Arts is honored to help connect military service members and their families with their communities through the Blue Star Museums program," said Mary Anne Carter, senior adviser for the National Endowment for the Arts, in the announcement.

Participating museums range from large institutions like the famous Shedd Aquarium in Chicago to smaller museums like the Billings Farm & Museum in Woodstock, Vermont.

A spot check of participating museums finds interesting nuggets, like the Kansas Barbed Wire Museum in LaCrosse. The "Barbed Wire Goes to War" exhibit displays military wire and tools. Concertina wire — rolls of twisted barbed wire — first came into widespread use during World War I.

One of their more unusual exhibits is a massive raven's nest built mostly out of hundreds of bits of barbed wire, lined with grass as a cushion for their eggs. A railroad engineer discovered it in a tree in Greeley County in the 1960s.

Some museums offer free admission to the general public all year, and some may offer special discounts for military and veterans. For example, admission is free at the Barbed Wire Museum, but donations are encouraged.

Before heading to a museum, be sure to check the hours and other information. ■

KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

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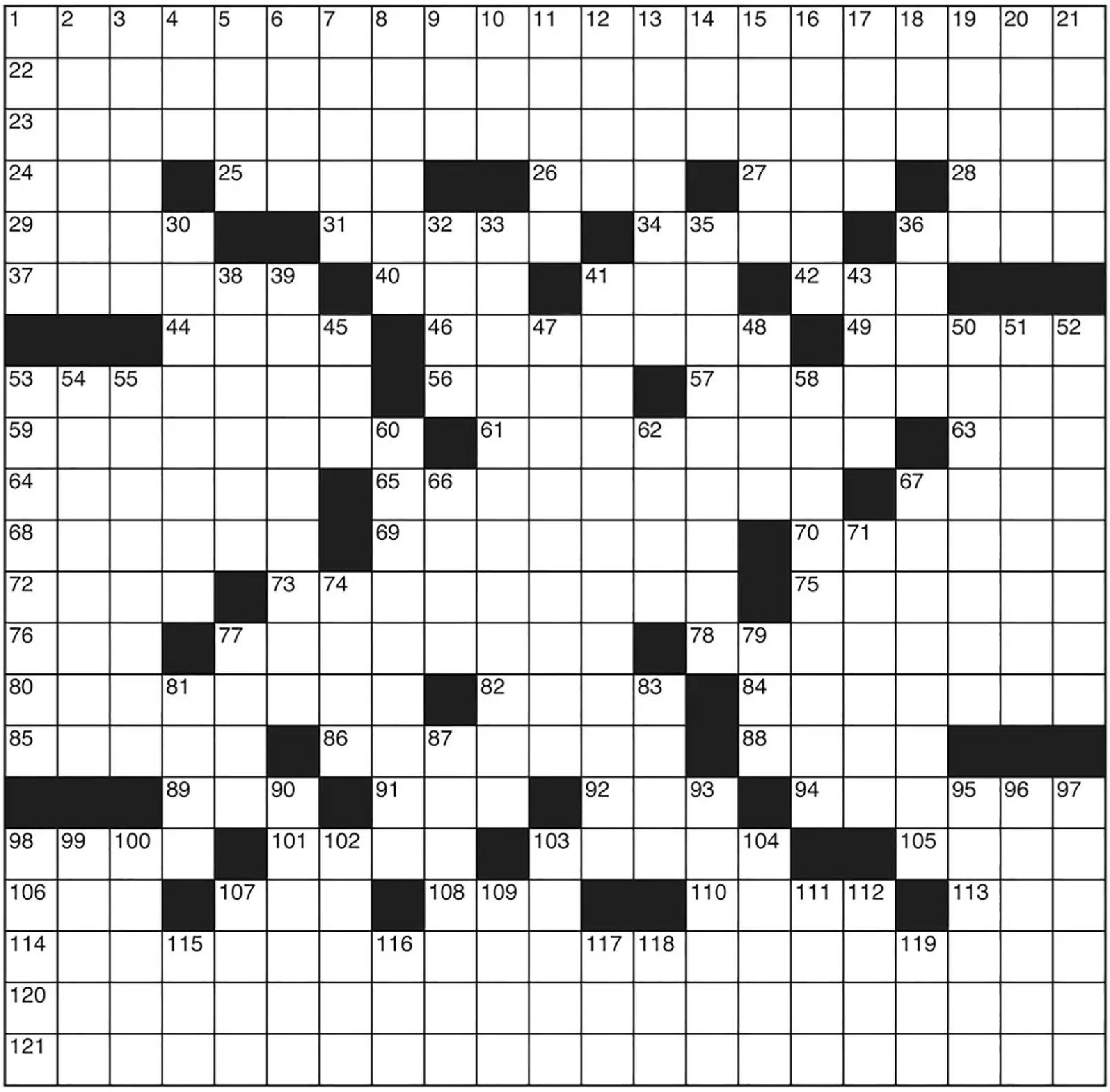
Crossword

UNTHEMED NO. 9: OPEN TOP AND BOTTOM



ACROSS

1 Genre for Sheryl Crow or Counting Crows
22 Catholicism or Methodism
23 Pointed out
24 Sleeve filler
25 Installed, as a carpet
26 Misstate facts on purpose
27 A, in Bonn
28 Wolf down
29 Close by
31 Rub clean
34 Richie's mom on "Happy Days," to Fonzie
36 To be, to Livy
37 Writer Hemingway
40 Pretense
41 AFL's merger partner
42 Guess on the cost: Abbr.
44 53, to Livy
46 Adjust the lens again
49 Give a tat to
53 Choose to join, as an email list
56 Noble above a viscount
57 City on Lake Geneva
59 Biggest part of the brain
61 Argentine soccer star, informally
63 Get it wrong
64 Competitor of Splenda and Equal
65 Makes unfriendly
67 Ingredient in bug sprays
68 "The Sixth Sense" co-star Haley Joel –
69 Cavity filler
70 Brand of adrenaline autoinjector
72 Bursts open
73 Move to a new country
75 "The deal is off"
76 Tri- less two
77 Jib on a ship
78 Popular permanent markers
80 Architect Eero or Eliel
82 Ending for flat or spy
84 Is present at
85 Man of Spain
86 Lessen the worth of
88 Cut of pork
89 On top of, poetically
91 Marina del –, California
92 Part of LAPD
94 Find a new chair for
98 Org. with fliers
101 Way yonder
103 Java causing no jolt?
105 "Little" girl in "David Copperfield"
106 Org. with the Flyers
107 "Cool" moola amount
108 Ukr. or Lat., once
110 Somersault
113 Repeating sound from a heart monitor
114 1987 #1 hit for Belinda Carlisle
120 Satirical 2007 Stephen Colbert book whose name uses bad grammar
121 Lock-in and walkout

DOWN

1 Esoteric
2 More beloved
3 Comic Tracey
4 Start of many rappers' names
5 Neutrogena shampoo brand
6 Verdi opera
7 Officer above a sarge
8 Treeless Arctic plain
9 Suffix with legal
10 Many GPS lines: Abbr.
11 Novelist Zora – Hurston
12 Voting "no"
13 Like some tribal poles
14 The Beatles' "– Mine"
15 Trailing plants
16 Seduce
17 Predominant
18 – -Aztecan languages
19 Functions in trigonometry
20 Greek vowels
21 100-buck bill
30 Eases, as discomfort
32 Land unit
33 Leaving furtively
35 Games with spun wheels
36 Sicilian volcano
38 Penalty box, informally
39 Chemistry procedure utilizing a reagent
41 The Raj in India, e.g.
43 "Yes, yes!," in Baja
45 Debt memo
47 No-cost test
48 RSVP facilitator
50 Symptom of an ACL injury
51 Taken from a spool
52 Saucy quality
53 The Beatles' "– Garden"
54 Dramatis – (characters in a play)
55 Like the 47th president's ideologies
58 What Orrin Hatch was for 42 yrs.
60 Golden age of advertising (the '60s)
62 Jib holder
66 Waikiki necklaces
67 Deal out in portions
71 Web-toed water dog breed, for short
74 Talking TV horse
77 Give the ax to
79 Linden of TV
81 House topper
83 Job rights agcy.
87 Gucci rival
90 Ella of "Brute Force"
93 Least risky
95 Stage after zygote
96 Landed atop
97 Malady also known as spotted fever
98 Not with it
99 Clip wool off
100 1836 Texas siege target
102 Be coquettish
103 "7 Faces of –" (Tony Randall film)
104 Sea bottom
107 Many a viral trend
109 Junk email
111 Old Andean
112 Bog moss
115 Brewpub tub
116 PBS' "– the Science Kid"
117 Raggedy –
118 Contents of jewel boxes
119 DiFranco of folk rock

CROSSWORD SOLUTION *page 54*

OPINION

A soldier burns waste outside a U.S. base near the village of Musa Qala, Helmand province, Afghanistan, 2006.

RODRIGO ABD/AP

I SOUNDED THE ALARM ON BURN PITS — AND NOW I SEE SMOKE AT THE VA

BY DAN CLARE

In 2008, I left Balad Air Base in Iraq with first-hand knowledge of what I feared would be one of the signature concerns to face my generation of veterans. Though the base was nicknamed "Mortaritaville," a nod to the daily enemy attacks, its sprawling open-air burn pit — roughly the size of 10 football fields — had the potential to cause a significantly greater health hazard for the hundreds of thousands of troops who deployed there.

These perpetually smoldering burn pits were so bad that flightline operations had to be rerouted. I kept one of the base's five-day weather forecasts. It accurately predicted "smoke/haze" for the entire week. People were already getting sick from the exposures we now know will continue to cast a long shadow in terms of the illnesses they cause — many chronic and many fatal.

That same year that I leaked the story to Military Times reporter Kelly Kennedy, before writing about it for the New York Times' "Home Fires" series, our current Veterans Affairs secretary, Doug Collins, deployed as a chaplain to Balad. There, he served the spiritual needs of those who worked at or were treated at the Air Force Theater Hospital. He counseled countless men and women who'd been sent into harm's way and were wounded. He prayed over those who had made the ultimate sacrifice. And, like everyone else on that base, he was exposed to hundreds of tons of burning waste that America's military and civilian leaders knew could have chronic and enduring consequences to their health.

Fortunately, for myself, Collins and hundreds of thousands of other veterans who'd been exposed, the PACT Act was signed into law in 2022. The hard-fought legislative victory helped expedite justice by presuming veterans' service connection for certain illnesses linked to toxic exposures, especially from burn pits.

In the less than three years since its passage, more than 2.1 million claims for benefits due to toxic exposures have been adjudicated and more than 436,000 additional veterans are now enrolled in VA health care. Although it took almost two decades for the federal government to acknowledge that veterans exposed to burn pits had been harmed — which is less than the average of 34 years it has historically taken to establish a presumptive condition for an exposure — we're getting closer than in past generations to keeping promises to the men and women who answer the call to serve.

NEW DANGER

Despite increases in demand for care and benefits, President Donald Trump's administration has used executive orders to cut the number of VA employees. Then a leak exposed plans for a reduction in force back to 2019 VA staffing levels, which was before the PACT Act provided millions of toxic-exposed veterans with earned benefits.

Although the "how" of these cuts remains a guarded mystery, about which veterans have been left in the dark, we know Secretary Collins' goal is to cut around 72,000 staff members, which is 15% of the department's workforce. Among those at risk of losing their jobs are around 20,000 veterans who bring invaluable insights into our health and benefits system.

Unlike previous administrations that sought and welcomed feedback from veteran stakeholders — the same organizations who (along with comedian, political commentator and "The Daily Show" host Jon Stewart) ultimately carried the PACT Act and other key policy victories for veterans across the finish line — this administration has offered no opportunity for public comment and scant details on its plans for transformation.

Instead, we are being promised a more efficient VA and are being told repeatedly that veterans' care and benefits will not be impacted.

TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY

The secretary, who spoke of sleeping next to a burn pit in his Senate confirmation hearing, has asked his fellow veterans to trust him. Cutting tens of thousands of positions while maintaining or even improving services for veterans in need sounds like a godsend to veterans and taxpayers alike. But we're talking about cuts at a time when the need is on the rise.

J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

The Honorable
Douglas A. Collins

Doug Collins testifies during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee on Jan. 21.

Care is already being affected, with interruptions in research impacting veterans participating in cancer trials. Ultimately, we're being asked to blindly trust the same government that's poisoned us over the course of generations.

Many veterans are worried. Some have already been fired from the VA or other agencies and others are service-disabled veterans with small businesses that have been devastated by cuts to government contracts. They're contacting organizations like DAV to vent their frustration and anxiety. But more is likely to come. And we're not sure what to tell them.

President Ronald Reagan's repeated mantra in nuclear negotiations was to "trust, but verify." The veterans community is coming out of the secretary's first 100 days with no way to verify his veracity. In the coming months, we will likely witness a sea change at the VA.

But the details on how those changes will impact veterans are hazy, not unlike the downwind side of a burn pit — and, paired with the lack of transparency we're experiencing at the VA, similarly concerning for the potential long-term impact to the veterans community. ■

Dan Clare is the chief communications and outreach officer for DAV (Disabled American Veterans). He is a former Marine and Air National Guardsman who served with the 332nd Air Wing at Balad Air Base during the Iraq War. Veterans and spouses can participate in DAV's survey by visiting dav.org/protect.

AirForceTimes

EDITORIAL
Executive Editor Jon Simkins
jon.simkins@mco.com
Managing Editor Beth Sullivan
beth.sullivan@militarytimes.com
Managing Editor Sebastian Sprenger
ssprenger@defensenews.com
Senior Editor Nikki Wentling
nikkiwentling@militarytimes.com
Ground Warfare Editor Todd South
tsouth@militarytimes.com
Land Warfare Reporter Jen Judson
jjudson@defensenews.com
Air Warfare Reporter Stephen Losey
slosey@defensenews.com
Capitol Hill Bureau Chief Leo Shane
lshane@militarytimes.com
Pentagon Reporter Noah Robertson
noah.robertson@defensenews.com
Military Communities Reporter Karen Jowers
kjowers@militarytimes.com
Space and Emerging Technology Reporter Courtney Albon
calbon@c4isrnet.com
General Assignment Reporter Riley Ceder
riley.ceder@sightlinemg.com
Military History Correspondent Jon Guttman
jguttman@historynet.com
Early Bird Brief Editor Anne-Marie Bissada
anne.bissada@mco.com

VIDEO & PHOTO
Executive Producer Ben Murray
bmurray@mco.com
Producer/Editor Shaun Barrows
sbarrows@mco.com
Editor, Short Form & Broadcast Patrick Hanson
patrick.hanson@militarytimes.com

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT
VP, Technology/Engineering Will Alexander
walexander@mco.com

DESIGN & PRODUCTION
Senior Director, Production Jamie Elliott
Print Editor Kent Miller
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ADVERTISING
Vice President, Media Solutions Robert Sitch
rsitch@defensenews.com
Western U.S. Ted Chase
tchase@militarytimes.com
Eastern U.S. & Education Pilar Allas
pallas@militarytimes.com
SVP, Head of Operations Kelly Facer
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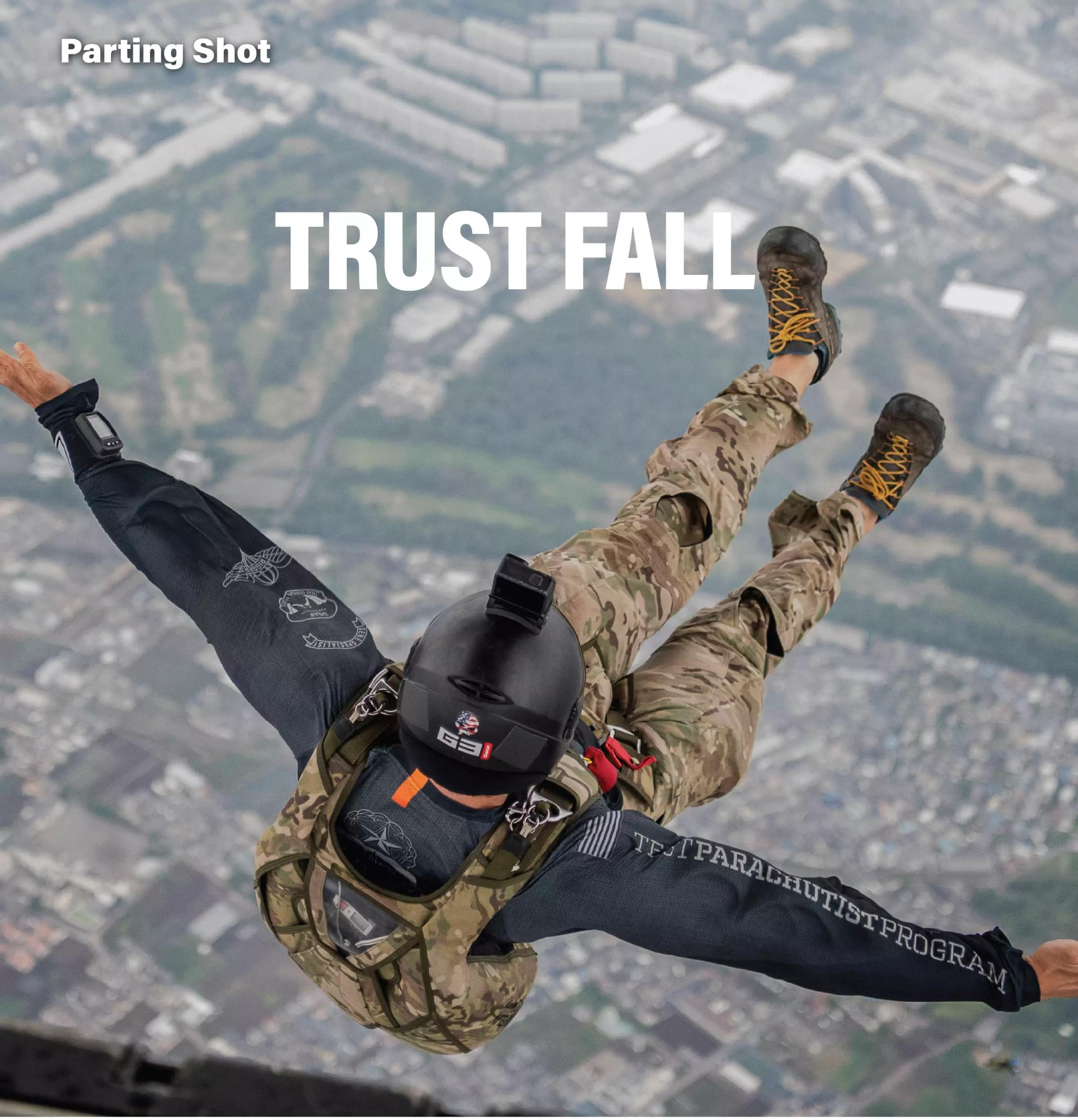
Parting Shot

TRUST FALL



An airman assigned to the 412th Test Wing conducts a military free fall demonstration during the Japanese-American Friendship Festival 2025 at Yokota Air Base, Japan, May 18.
Photo by Staff Sgt. Spencer Tobler/Air Force

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